

What Did Jacob Know And When?

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Jacob was completely taken in by Joseph's bloody coat his brothers used to cover up the sale of Joseph into slavery. "It is my son's coat; an evil beast hath devoured him; Joseph is without doubt rent in pieces. And Jacob rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his loins, and mourned for his son many days . . . he refused to be comforted; and he said, For I will go down into the grave unto my son mourning" (Genesis 37:33-35). But, their coverup was doomed to fail very soon not years later when famine brought Joseph's brothers into Egypt to buy grain. After many days mourning, it is reasonable to assume that Jacob learned the truth about Joseph's enslavement, a fate tantamount to death. But, as with Reuben's adultery with his concubine Bilhah (Genesis 35:22), Jacob wisely dropped the matter for which there was no civil remedy in Israel.

Let us consider evidence pointing to an early collapse of the bloody-coat coverup. First, when his sons returned minus Simeon bringing a demand for Benjamin to come to Egypt, Jacob blamed his sons for Simeon's incarceration, equating it with Joseph's "demise" in Israel. "Me have ye bereaved of my children: Joseph is not, and Simeon is not, and ye will take Benjamin away . . . My son shall not go down with you; for his brother is dead" (Genesis 42:36,38). Another sign of early failure of the coverup comes in Judah's pleading before Joseph incognito for Benjamin's freedom. Judah rehearses another conversation he and his brothers had with Jacob to convince him to send Benjamin. "And thy servant my father said unto us, Ye know that my wife bare me two sons: And the one went out from me, and I said, Surely he is torn in pieces; and I saw him not since" (Genesis 44:27-28). Note, Jacob does not again affirm that Joseph was "rent in pieces." Rather, he gives a paraphrase of what he said, when he first saw the bloody coat, since he no longer believes that Joseph had been "torn in pieces." He finally affirms "and I saw him not since."

Moreover, there is collateral evidence that keeping a secret from such a careful observer as Jacob is about as difficult as hiding an elephant in a closet. Solomon admonishes those under authority to "Curse not the king, no not in thy thought; and curse not the rich in thy bedchamber: for a bird of the air shall carry the voice, and that which hath wings shall tell the matter" (Ecclesiastes 10:20). Solomon has also observed that "The lip of truth shall be established for ever: but a lying tongue is but for a moment" (Proverbs 12:19). Lies are futile. The truth will out. Indeed, as Charles Colson has pointed out, even the powerful Watergate conspirators, numbering about 10 men, were unable to maintain their coverup for much "more than two weeks" (1983:67).*

Like many large families, Israel was torn with dissension. Jacob's unjust hatred for Leah, his first wife (Genesis 29:31), prompted bitter resentment among Leah's loyal sons. When Joseph, Rachel's first born, was elevated in place of Reuben, Jacob's first born by Leah, Joseph's brothers "hated him, and could not speak peaceably unto him" (Genesis 37:4). After Joseph was sold into slavery, Judah, Leah's ablest son, left Israel and began to live like a Canaanite (Genesis 38). Having lost his two best managers, Jacob became more entrenched in favoritism to Rachel's son, Benjamin. Unity in Israel seemed an impossible dream. Then the Lord sent a famine which economically forced Judah back to Hebron under Jacob's authority in time to lead his brothers into repentance from their envy of Rachel's seed under the scrutiny of Joseph. The famine also forced Jacob to repent and free Benjamin for his part in Joseph's bold plan for reconciliation in Israel.

* "Loving God", 1983, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.