

## Who was Benjamin in the Bible?

Benjamin was a son of Jacob and head of one of the twelve tribes of Israel. Benjamin was the twelfth-born and youngest son in Jacob's family. He was born to Jacob's wife Rachel, making Benjamin the full brother of Joseph. His story is found in Genesis chapters 35-49. It is here that we learn of his birth (Genesis 35); his relationship to his father and brothers (Genesis 37, 42-45); his relationship with Joseph (Genesis 43-45); his children (Genesis 46); and the blessing he received from his father (Genesis 46:21).

Jacob had two wives, Rachel and Leah. He loved Rachel with such fervor that he worked for her dad for seven years to earn the right to marry her (Genesis 29:18), seven years that "seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her" (Genesis 29:20). This love helps us to understand Jacob's affection for Benjamin, born to his beloved Rachel. Rachel had great difficulty in giving birth to Benjamin. Her midwife told her that she was having another son. Rachel died in childbirth, but, as she was dying, she named her son Ben-Oni, which means "Son of My Trouble." Jacob renamed him Benjamin, "Son of My Right Hand" (Genesis 35:18).

Benjamin was not part of the conspiracy concocted by his ten older brothers to kill their brother Joseph. Later, when the brothers had to travel to Egypt to seek food during a famine, Jacob's love for his youngest son compelled him to keep Benjamin home "because he was afraid that harm might come to him" (Genesis 42:4). The other brothers traveled to Egypt and met with the governor of Egypt (Joseph, whom his brothers did not recognize). Joseph tested his brothers by accusing them of spying and demanding that they prove their honesty by bringing Benjamin back with them: "You will not leave this place unless your youngest brother comes here" (Genesis 42:15). Joseph shut them all in

prison for three days and then released all but Simeon. The others returned home with the grain they had purchased—and the money that Joseph had secretly returned to them (verse 25).

Back in Canaan, Jacob laments his predicament: “You have deprived me of my children. Joseph is no more and Simeon is no more, and now you want to take Benjamin. Everything is against me!” (Genesis 42:36). For a while, Jacob refused to allow Benjamin to make the trip back to Egypt (verse 38). He later relented when they ran out of grain and Judah promised to personally guarantee Benjamin’s safe return (Genesis 43:8-9).

Upon arriving in Egypt, the brothers presented themselves to Joseph, who was still unrecognized by them. Joseph, as he greeted the brothers this second time, “looked about and saw his brother Benjamin, his own mother’s son, [and] he asked, ‘Is this your youngest brother, the one you told me about?’ And he said, ‘God be gracious to you, my son.’ Deeply moved at the sight of his brother, Joseph hurried out and looked for a place to weep” (Genesis 43:29-30).

Joseph showed favor to Benjamin by preparing five times more food and drink for him than for his brothers when they gathered for dinner (Genesis 43:34). When it came time for the children of Israel to return to their father, Joseph used Benjamin as the means of further testing them. Joseph placed a silver cup in Benjamin’s bag along with the money for the grain (Genesis 44:1-2). Joseph let his brothers set out on their journey and then sent a steward after them to feign outrage over the fact that they possessed stolen property. The brothers proclaimed their innocence, but, sure enough, the silver cup was found in Benjamin’s possession; the brothers tore their garments in grief (verses 3-13). As punishment for their “crime,” Joseph demanded that Benjamin remain in Egypt. But

Judah—the same brother who had suggested years earlier that Joseph be sold into slavery—pleads with Joseph, saying, “Now then, please let your servant remain here as my lord’s slave in 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 on my father” (Genesis 44:33-34). So, the brothers passed the test; they demonstrated a true change of heart from the time when they had mistreated Joseph.

Joseph finally revealed himself to his brothers: “I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that . . . God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God” (Genesis 45:4-8). Joseph then instructed his brothers to bring their father and all they possessed to Egypt, and “he threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept, and Benjamin embraced him, weeping” (verse 14).

Years later in Egypt, as Jacob prepared to die, he blessed Benjamin, saying, “Benjamin is a ravenous wolf; in the morning he devours the prey, in the evening he divides the plunder” (Genesis 49:27). The tribe of Benjamin became famous for their skill in battle and warlike nature. We learn more about Benjamin and the tribe of Benjamin throughout the books of Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, and Judges. Descendants of Benjamin include Ehud, one of the judges; Saul, Israel’s first king; Queen Esther; and the apostle Paul.