

Comments on Genesis 47

Jacob's extended family takes up residence in Egypt. Despite cultural norms of rejecting shepherds, Pharaoh graciously accepts Joseph's extended family into Egypt, puts them into Joseph's hands, and gives them access to the very best grazing land, and perhaps they'll be employed as royal herders.

The drought continues and Joseph's management of the Egyptian grain stores results in Pharaoh owning everyone and everything, with the exception of the Egyptian priests and Jacob's family. Jacob's family prospers exceptionally, while the rest of the Egyptians end up indentured.

Overall, the purpose of the chapter is to show the reader how good Jacob's extended family had it initially while living in Egypt, in contrast to where they are at the start of Exodus.

An implied detail in this chapter is that while the rest of his family is living in Goshen, Joseph has maintained his separation from them in living with his own wife and children separate from them, and Joseph has continued in his duties as Pharaoh's vizier. Joseph has not reverted to acting like a Canaanite shepherd when reunited with his family. He continues his life as an Egyptian while his extended family continues their lives as Canaanite shepherds in Goshen.

¹ Then Joseph came and told Pharaoh, and said, My father and my brethren, and their flocks, and their herds, and all that they have, are come out of the land of Canaan; and, behold, they are in the land of Goshen. ² And he took some of his brethren, even five men, and presented them unto Pharaoh. ³ And Pharaoh said unto his brethren, what is your occupation? And they said unto Pharaoh, Thy servants are shepherds, both we, and also our fathers. ⁴ They said moreover unto Pharaoh, For to sojourn in the land are we come; for thy servants have no pasture for their flocks; for the famine is sore in the land of Canaan: now therefore, we pray thee, let thy servants dwell in the land of Goshen. ⁵ And Pharaoh spake unto Joseph, saying, Thy father and thy brethren are come unto thee: ⁶ The land of Egypt is before thee; in the best of the land make thy father and brethren to dwell; in the land of Goshen let them dwell: and if thou knowest any men of activity among them, then make them rulers over my cattle.

⁷ And Joseph brought in Jacob his father, and set him before Pharaoh: and Jacob blessed Pharaoh. ⁸ And Pharaoh said unto Jacob, How old art thou? ⁹ And Jacob said unto Pharaoh, The days of the years of my pilgrimage are an hundred and thirty years: few and evil have the days of the years of my life been, and have not attained unto the days of the years of the life of my

fathers in the days of their pilgrimage.¹⁰ And Jacob blessed Pharaoh, and went out from before Pharaoh.

¹¹ And Joseph placed his father and his brethren, and gave them a possession in the land of Egypt, in the best of the land, in the land of Rameses, as Pharaoh had commanded.¹² And Joseph nourished his father, and his brethren, and all his father's household, with bread, according to their families.

v1-12 After the entire extended family has arrived in Goshen (cf. ch. 26), Joseph informs Pharaoh of their arrival, making it clear their intent is to permanently relocate (v. 1). Joseph takes five of the brothers to meet Pharaoh (v. 2), leaving the other six behind. Pharaoh asks them what they do for a living, and they tell him they are shepherds and their family has always been shepherds (v. 3), in defiance of Joseph's earlier admonition to tell the Egyptians they keep livestock (cf. 46:34). The brothers explicitly defer to Pharaoh and formally request they be allowed to live and pasture their flocks in Goshen (v. 4). Pharaoh puts Joseph's family into Joseph's hands (v. 5), making them his responsibility, but granting them access to the best land Egypt has. Pharaoh then tells Joseph that if any of his family are good with other livestock, then have them take care of the royal livestock (v. 6).

Joseph then presents his father, Jacob, and Jacob greets him (v. 7). Pharaoh speaks directly to Jacob, asking him how old he is (v. 8). Jacob responds with his age of 130 years, saying his years have been short and difficult, and he has not lived as long as his fathers (v. 9). Jacob bids Pharaoh farewell and departs (v. 10).

Joseph then settles his family in the land of Goshen, in the very best royal land (v. 11), and Joseph feeds his extended family according to their needs (v. 12).

v2 The JPS renders this verse as follows:

And carefully selecting a few [Lit. "five."] of his brothers, he presented them to Pharaoh.

Robert Alter renders the verse as follows:

And from the pick of his brothers he took five men and presented them to Pharaoh.

Alter's comments on the text indicate the Hebrew is clearly forwarding the reading that Joseph was deliberately selective in which brothers he selected to take to Pharaoh.

Why does Joseph only take five of his brothers? Perhaps the four oldest sons of Leah, and Benjamin? Perhaps the more refined brothers, so as to not be an embarrassment? Or, half of the brothers are left with Jacob and the family to tend the flocks and manage the households? We are left guessing as to what specifically Joseph's motivation was. The JPS and Alter translations suggest it was a matter of Joseph deciding who went to meet Pharaoh based on his own choice, and not any pragmatic reason. We would also assume the grandsons were capable of managing the flocks and households with the assistance of the women. So, it seems likely Joseph was picking the more presentable brothers to take to Pharaoh.

This sort of selectivity among the brothers shows how far-reaching Jacob's favoritism is that even the son who suffered the most because of Jacob's preferential treatment is now engaging in the same behavior. Rather than preparing the other six brothers to make the presentable, he chooses among them and leaves some behind.

v3 Despite Joseph's admonition they tell Pharaoh that they keep livestock in general, and not sheep in specific, the brothers go ahead and tell Pharaoh they keep sheep, and add that their ancestral families have always kept sheep. Why would they do such a thing? Pride, or stupidity, or did they see it as an integral part of their request to Pharaoh? They want to let Pharaoh know their request for grazing rights in Goshen is only temporary, as long as the drought in Canaan continues. The implication is they aren't requesting permanent ownership of land or residency as Egyptians, only temporary access to grazing lands, that will end when the drought ends, because they and their ancestors are inhabitants of Canaan, not Egypt. An approach like this has merit, as they are letting Pharaoh know it is not a permanent request, but, clearly, Joseph has a better understanding of how to communicate with the Egyptians, and they ignore his advice.

Regardless, Joseph would likely have been irritated with them. Fortunately, Pharaoh is gracious, largely overlooking the local cultural norm of despising shepherds, cf. 46:34.

v4 The sons of Jacob first present "sojourn" and then request "dwell". The first statement is temporary and the second statement is long-term or permanent. They suggest the situation is temporary, identifying themselves as shepherds of Canaan dislocated as a result of the drought, implying that when the grazing conditions in Canaan improve then they would leave.

v5-6 The Pharaoh doesn't speak to the brothers directly after they have addressed him, stating they are shepherds. Instead, he speaks to Joseph and tells Joseph what to do with them. While Pharaoh is gracious in granting their request, he does decline to address them directly, probably because they are shepherds.

Also note in v. 6 that Pharaoh tells Joseph that if there are any competent herders among them, that they are to be put in charge of his livestock. The reader would assume Pharaoh's livestock includes horses and cattle, not sheep. Pharaoh's statement is a condition placed on Joseph, where the expectation is Joseph evaluate the fitness of his brother's ability to manage cattle and horses, and then, if they are good at it, they are to manage Pharaoh's livestock. If not, then he doesn't want them involved in it. This could be seen as payment as serviced rendered for access to the land of Goshen.

This is likely a subtle nod to the odious nature of shepherds among Egyptians. Pharaoh is making it clear there is a difference between shepherds and cattlemen, and being an experience shepherd doesn't necessarily make you good with horses and cattle. So, he expects Joseph to be discerning enough with his brothers to not employ them as managers of royal livestock if they are not capable with horses and cattle. If Joseph is insistent on having his brothers manage the royal livestock, it would be his responsibility to train them and get them to do it according to Egyptian standards.

v11 The best land would naturally be the royal land, and would be the last to dry out in a famine, as the royal livestock graze there. Hence Pharaoh's suggestion to Joseph that his brothers manage the royal livestock if they are competent. They are both already there.

¹³ And there was no bread in all the land; for the famine was very sore, so that the land of Egypt and all the land of Canaan fainted by reason of the famine. ¹⁴ And Joseph gathered up all the money that was found in the land of Egypt, and in the land of Canaan, for the corn which they bought: and Joseph brought the money into Pharaoh's house. ¹⁵ And when money failed in the land of Egypt, and in the land of Canaan, all the Egyptians came unto Joseph, and said, Give us bread: for why should we die in thy presence? for the money faileth. ¹⁶ And Joseph said, Give your cattle; and I will give you for your cattle, if money fail. ¹⁷ And they brought their cattle unto Joseph: and Joseph gave them bread in exchange for horses, and for the flocks, and for the cattle of the herds, and for the asses: and he fed them with

bread for all their cattle for that year. ¹⁸ When that year was ended, they came unto him the second year, and said unto him, We will not hide it from my lord, how that our money is spent; my lord also hath our herds of cattle; there is not ought left in the sight of my lord, but our bodies, and our lands: ¹⁹ wherefore shall we die before thine eyes, both we and our land? buy us and our land for bread, and we and our land will be servants unto Pharaoh: and give us seed, that we may live, and not die, that the land be not desolate.

v13-19 The famine continues throughout all of Egypt and Canaan (v. 13). All of Egypt and Canaan run out of money to buying grain from Pharaoh (v. 14). When they have no money left, the Egyptians come to Joseph and ask what they need to do to not die of starvation (v. 15). Joseph tells them to bring in their livestock on barter (v. 16), which they do, and it feeds them for a year (v. 17). The following year they again approach Joseph and tell them they have run out of livestock, so what is next (v. 18), so Joseph takes their lands and indentures the people in exchange for grain (v. 19).

²⁰ And Joseph bought all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh; for the Egyptians sold every man his field, because the famine prevailed over them: so the land became Pharaoh's. ²¹ And as for the people, he removed them to cities from one end of the borders of Egypt even to the other end thereof. ²² Only the land of the priests bought he not; for the priests had a portion assigned them of Pharaoh, and did eat their portion which Pharaoh gave them: wherefore they sold not their lands.

²³ Then Joseph said unto the people, Behold, I have bought you this day and your land for Pharaoh: lo, here is seed for you, and ye shall sow the land. ²⁴ And it shall come to pass in the increase, that ye shall give the fifth part unto Pharaoh, and four parts shall be your own, for seed of the field, and for your food, and for them of your households, and for food for your little ones. ²⁵ And they said, Thou hast saved our lives: let us find grace in the sight of my lord, and we will be Pharaoh's servants. ²⁶ And Joseph made it a law over the land of Egypt unto this day, that Pharaoh should have the fifth part, except the land of the priests only, which became not Pharaoh's.

v20-26 Joseph transfers ownership of the entirety of all of Egypt into the hands of Pharaoh (v. 20). The people are moved off the barren land into the cities (v. 21). The only land that did not end up in Pharaoh's ownership is the dedicated priestly land, because Pharaoh gave it to them and fed them through taxes (v. 22). Joseph plans for the recovery from the drought by telling the farmers that they will be given seed to plant the land (v. 23) and twenty percent of all increase will go to

Pharaoh, the rest for them (v. 24). The people are happy with the terms offered them and accept (v. 25), so it becomes the law of the land, with the exception of the priests (v. 26).

v21 This is likely intended to convey a pragmatic detail, as well as to reveal the level of influence Joseph now has over all of the entire population of Egypt. It is pragmatic that farmers who cannot farm be moved into the cities to be fed and then productive in whatever way possible. But, it also shows the Egyptians that Joseph is in complete control of them and the land, which they no longer own. It is Pharaoh's land now, so there is no reason for them to live on it. Joseph is breaking the ancestral property rights by forcing the people off the land.

v24-25 While the state, as Pharaoh, now owns the land and the people by debt, Joseph is presented as still negotiating with them in good faith, as opposed to being a ruthless dictator. Joseph recognizes happy farmers will be more productive and present fewer problems in the long run. Note the text presents Joseph as very much in charge, with Pharaoh entirely absent from the narrative. We would have to assume that in reality Joseph is conferring and consulting with Pharaoh during the process, but for the sake of the narrative, this is a story about Joseph and the bureaucratic details are irrelevant.

27 And Israel dwelt in the land of Egypt, in the country of Goshen; and they had possessions therein, and grew, and multiplied exceedingly. 28 And Jacob lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years: so the whole age of Jacob was an hundred forty and seven years. 29 And the time drew nigh that Israel must die: and he called his son Joseph, and said unto him, If now I have found grace in thy sight, put, I pray thee, thy hand under my thigh, and deal kindly and truly with me; bury me not, I pray thee, in Egypt: 30 But I will lie with my fathers, and thou shalt carry me out of Egypt, and bury me in their buryingplace. And he said, I will do as thou hast said. 31 And he said, Swear unto me. And he sware unto him. And Israel bowed himself upon the bed's head.

v27-31 The family of Israel lives in Goshen and does very well there (v. 27). Jacob lives another seventeen years to an age of 147 (v. 28), and he is at the end of his life so he summons Joseph and asks him to swear to bury him in Canaan (v. 29) where his fathers are buried, to which Joseph agrees (v. 30). Jacob makes him swear by oath, which he does, and Jacob bows down in thanks to the Lord (v. 31).

v27 Note "Israel" is no longer Jacob in specific, but "they" the family in general, who "multiplied exceedingly". The Egyptian stayover resulted in them not only surviving the drought, but doing very well when the rest of the people of Canaan and Egypt lose everything.

With Jacob's imminent death the title of Israel transfers from the one man to the descendants of the man. Previously there were narratorial asides about the nation of Israel (cf. 32:32, 34:7, 36:31), but this is the first time in the narrative portion of the text where the family is explicitly identified as Israel, not the man Jacob. Egypt is where the family of the man called Israel became the nation of Israel.

v28 "seventeen years", Jacob and family stay well past the original timespan of the seven year famine. The situation was so favorable there was no reason for them to leave, despite the original assertion of being Canaanite shepherds (cf. v. 3-4). Jacob would naturally be resistant to leaving Joseph, the favored son. But, even after Jacob passes, the rest of the family makes no effort to leave before the situation goes bad in Exod. 1.

The original prediction has them in Egypt 400 years (cf. 15:13-14), but there is nothing keeping them there at this moment except their own choice. Things are good at the moment, so why leave now? From a theological standpoint, is this a matter of the Lord's foreknowledge of human behavior, or the deterministic fulfilment of the Lord's word? We would read the former.

v29 Jacob summons Joseph because he is the one whom the Lord told him would bury him (cf. 46:3-4), and because Joseph is the one who brought him out of Canaan (cf. 45:21-46:7) and he has the means to take him back and bury him there (cf. 50:4-14). Also, Joseph has clearly always been the favored son. If Jacob had only one son, it was Joseph, as we see in the next chapter.

v31 Jacob bows down in giving thanks to the Lord for Joseph's oath to bury him in Canaan, per the promises of 46:3-4. See 50:4-14 for the fulfilment.

That Jacob bows down in his own bed is simply indicative of his infirmity, at this age and condition he was unable to get out of bed (cf. 48:2), so he bowed down in deference to the Lord to the best of his ability.

In Jacob's old age, at the end of his life, he recognizes all the Lord has done for him in fulfilling all He has said he would do for him, in every way.

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