

Genesis 47:1-26

Jacob and Pharaoh

Last time we saw that after more than 250 miles of difficult travel, and more than twenty-five years of mourning, Jacob once again beheld his beloved Joseph. The two had wept together and tried to bring a sense of order to the past two decades. Jacob's entire family had migrated to Egypt, bringing with them their flocks and herds, and all their other possessions. With the permission of Pharaoh, who had offered them "the best of the land of Egypt" (Genesis 45:18), they hoped to survive the remaining five years of famine. Jacob had wavered for a moment as he had undertaken the journey, but with the reassurance that "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 with you to Egypt, and I will also assuredly bring you up again; and Joseph will close your eyes," Jacob had gone forward in faith (Genesis 46:3-4).

The family had arrived in Egypt where, after a tearful welcome, Joseph had turned to business. He wanted the interview with Pharaoh to go smoothly. Joseph wanted to impose on the goodwill he had earned with Pharaoh when he had interpreted his dreams and come up with the administrative plan that was saving Egypt from the famine. He was concerned that any breach of protocol or perceived offense might cause Pharaoh to revoke his offer of land and result in the family being sent back to Canaan to deal with the remaining years of famine as best they could.

So Joseph concluded his first meeting with his father and brothers by stating,

"I will go up and tell Pharaoh, and will say to him, 'My brothers and my father's household, who were in the land of Canaan, have come to me; and the men are shepherds, for they have been keepers of livestock; and they have brought their flocks and their herds and all that they have.' When Pharaoh calls for you and says, 'what is your occupation?' you shall say, 'your servants have been keepers of livestock since our youth even until now, both we and our fathers,' so that you may live in the land of Goshen; for every shepherd is an abomination to the Egyptians'" (Genesis 46:31-34).

Pharaoh Meets Some of Joseph's Brothers

After settling his family, and no doubt reminding them several times of what they were to say and how they were to behave in Pharaoh's presence, Joseph returned to Pharaoh. He delivered the good news that his family had arrived safely in Egypt. "Joseph went in and told Pharaoh, and said, 'my father and my brothers and their flocks and their herds and all that they have, have come out of the land of Canaan; and behold, they are in the land of Goshen'" (v. 1).

Recall that Joseph had a plan. And according to that plan, he approached Pharaoh and reminded him that the land of Goshen had been promised as the place where his family could settle. It was an extensive grazing land and far enough removed from the urban areas of Egyptian settlement to avoid any unpleasant encounters with the local population. There, it was hoped, Jacob and the family could, if not thrive, at least survive, the famine. So, having made the presence of his family known to Pharaoh, Joseph "took five men from among his brothers and presented them to Pharaoh" (v. 2).

The language indicates that this was one meeting. That is, Joseph did not travel from Goshen to Pharaoh's palace, announce his family's arrival, and then return to Goshen to select five brothers and return to Pharaoh to introduce them. Instead, He took the chosen brothers with him when he went to make known the arrival of the family, and his brothers had waited patiently in an antechamber while Joseph reported to Pharaoh the coming of his father and the family. With Pharaoh's permission then, Joseph presented his brothers to the king of all Egypt.

It is possible that Joseph selected only five so as not to cause concern in Pharaoh's mind regarding a potentially great number of people. Scripture is also silent on which five Joseph chose, or what the criteria might have been for their selection. I might guess that Reuben (as the firstborn), Judah (as the new leader among the brothers), and Benjamin (as Joseph's favorite) would be among those chosen for the honor of meeting Pharaoh, but this is mere speculation. In fact, ancient Jewish authors suggest that Joseph chose the older and weaker of the brothers in order to discourage Pharaoh from recruiting these men into his army. Thus, these authors suggest Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Benjamin, and Issachar were the selected brothers.

Whoever the brothers were, Pharaoh seemed pleased to see them, and the interview went well. ³Pharaoh said to his brothers, 'what is your occupation?' So they said to Pharaoh, 'your servants are shepherds, both we and our fathers.' ⁴They also said to Pharaoh, 'we have come to reside in the land, for there is no pasture for your servants' flocks, for the famine is severe in the land of Canaan. Now, therefore, please let your servants live in the land of Goshen'" (v. 3-4).

The conversation had been carefully scripted by Joseph and, fortunately, the brothers remembered their lines well. Joseph had guessed correctly, or perhaps he was very familiar with Pharaoh's interests, and knew that Pharaoh would first ask about the brothers' occupation. Like any head of state, Pharaoh wanted to be certain these immigrants could provide for themselves and not become a burden on the increasingly overloaded capacity of Egypt to care for the starving and indigent. It no doubt also eased Pharaoh's mind to be informed that this was not a race of warriors.

The brothers were honest. They told Pharaoh that they were shepherds as Joseph had instructed them, even knowing that "every shepherd is an abomination to the Egyptians" (Genesis 46:34). Joseph wanted no deception in his family's relationship with the throne. Everything was to be made clear up front. One can easily suppose that Joseph knew well the stories of his grandfather, Abraham, and his father, Isaac, and the troubles they had made for themselves by lying to heads of state (Genesis 20:8-12, 26:6-11).

Joseph's confidence in Pharaoh was rewarded as neither in this case, nor later, did such the fact that these Hebrews were shepherds cause Pharaoh to change his mind regarding his promises to Joseph's family. The brothers also volunteered other information. The brothers told Pharaoh plainly that they "have come to reside in the land, for there is no pasture for your servants' flocks, for the famine is severe in the land of Canaan" (v. 4). Here, again, the brothers were supplicants. The famine had humbled them. Three times in their speech they referred to themselves as "your servants" and they made no mention of having been invited by either their well-placed brother, or by Pharaoh. They simply relied upon Pharaoh's good graces and mercy to help them.

Pharaoh did not respond directly to the brothers, but instead he directed his remarks to his chief minister, Joseph. “⁵Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘your father and your brothers have come to you. ⁶The land of Egypt is at your disposal; settle your father and your brothers in the best of the land, let them live in the land of Goshen; and if you know any capable men among them, then put them in charge of my livestock” (v. 5-6). This was not rudeness on Pharaoh’s part. In fact, he was quite used to delegating the administration of his kingdom to Joseph and probably spoke to him about the relocation of these immigrants as a matter of course.

Pharaoh’s response might, though, at first reading not make sense. The brothers had just requested that they be permitted to live in the land of Goshen. Pharaoh seems to answer by telling Joseph that his brothers have come to him, implying that *he* must do something about it. But a more sensible reading would be *since* “⁵your father and your brothers have come to you. ⁶The land of Egypt is at your disposal” (v. 5-6). That is, Pharaoh was making it clear that his hospitality was being extended not because of the need of the brothers but because of his loyalty to Joseph. Sadly, we know that this friendly relationship between the house of Jacob and the ruling family of Egypt would not continue.

“⁸Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. ⁹And he said to his people, ‘behold, the people of the sons of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. ¹⁰Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, otherwise they will multiply, and in the event of war, they will also join those who hate us, and fight against us and depart from the land” (Exodus 1:8-10).

But for now, these Hebrews were welcome. As Pharaoh had promised, they were given “the best of the land” of Egypt (v. 6). Implied in this offer, of course, was that they would not settle too near other Egyptian settlements, due both to the nature of their occupation and the fact that, as shepherds, they needed territory to graze their flocks and herds.

Pharaoh also amended his original offer adding the opportunity of employment in Pharaoh’s service. Fully aware of how Joseph’s God had blessed all that he had laid his hand to, Pharaoh encouraged Joseph that “if you know any capable men among them, then put them in charge of my livestock” (v. 6). This implied that the best of Pharaoh’s herds were pastured in the land of Goshen as well, indicating that the land given to these settlers was, in fact, the best of the land. Also, that there was a need for foreigners to oversee the flocks and herds of Pharaoh was a reminder that the occupation of shepherding was beneath the dignity of upper class Egyptians.

Pharaoh Meets Jacob

Having endured his brothers’ formal audience with Pharaoh without incident, Joseph then brought His father before the great king. Again, this was likely the same meeting. Joseph simply stepped into an adjacent room and brought his father forward. Perhaps Joseph had not taken Jacob in first to meet with Pharaoh to spare his old and revered father the blushes of having to be the one to beg for land. But now, “Joseph brought his father Jacob and presented him to Pharaoh; and Jacob blessed Pharaoh” (v. 7).

Though foreign rulers had often been blessed *because* of their association with the patriarchs, this is the first recorded event in Scripture where a patriarch formally blesses a foreign prince. One implication of the act is that Pharaoh considered Jacob, if not an equal, at least a worthy man, probably due to his

advanced age (Jacob was 130 and Egyptians believed that 110 years was the measure of a life blessed by the gods), and the fact that he was the head of his people.

We do not know the exact nature of the blessing, but it was likely that since Pharaoh had been generous to Jacob's family, Jacob prayed that God would be generous to Pharaoh. After all, Pharaoh had promoted Joseph to a prominent position at his court, he had sent food and other supplies back to Canaan twice, and he had invited the family to settle in the best of the land. That Pharaoh now received Jacob so kindly was an affirmation that God was with Jacob and Jacob's people in Egypt.

After the initial blessing, Pharaoh and Jacob exchanged pleasantries. ⁸Pharaoh said to Jacob, 'how many years have you lived?' ⁹So Jacob said to Pharaoh, 'the years of my living abroad are 130; few and unpleasant have been the years of my life, nor have they attained the years that my fathers lived during the days of their living abroad'" (v. 8-9). That Pharaoh first asked about Jacob's age reflected, no doubt, the physical frailness of the aged patriarch, but also the admiration that Near Eastern culture had for those blessed with long life. Even in Hebrew culture, advanced age was a sign of God's favor (Leviticus 19:32; Psalm 128:5-6) and wisdom (Job 12:12). Indeed, lack of respect for the elderly was the sign of a decadent society (Deuteronomy 28:50).

Jacob claimed his 130 years, and yet he described his years as few. This strange statement must be considered in the context of his grandfather Abraham who lived to be 170 (Genesis 25:7) and his father Isaac who lived to be 180 (Genesis 35:28). Perhaps less surprisingly, Jacob described himself as a sojourner, despite God's promises of land. His life *had* been spent "living abroad" (v. 9). More curious was Jacob's characterization of these years as "few and unpleasant" (v. 9). Surely, Jacob remembered how he had been blessed by God. God's presence with him throughout his life had been demonstrated time and time again. But here, in a moment of reflection, the treachery of his sons and the loss of Joseph came to the forefront of Jacob's mind. We also might consider that perhaps his answer was as much for Joseph's ears as it was for Pharaoh. He could not help but impress upon Joseph how much the loss of his beloved Rachel and his favorite son had soured his existence.

Scripture does not record any response of Pharaoh to this unsolicited, and heartfelt, revelation. Instead, with the interview at its conclusion, "Jacob blessed Pharaoh, and went out from his presence." (v. 10). To be sure, Jacob was old and felt himself abused by his sons, but that did not make him cynical or bitter. Instead he brought close his time with Pharaoh by again calling down blessings upon his head. Jacob understood, it seems, that this pagan king was the means which his God was using to be the source of survival for his family, and he wanted to extend the blessings of his God upon him.

Upon returning to Goshen, ¹¹Joseph settled his father and his brothers and gave them property in the land of Egypt, in the best of the land, in the land of Rameses, as Pharaoh had ordered. ¹²Joseph also provided his father and his brothers and all his father's household with food, according to the number of their little ones" (v. 11-12). In this text, the "best of the land" (v. 11) is not called Goshen but Ramses. This is anachronistic, and must have been added by a later author to contemporize the geographic setting. Though there were inhabitants in that region at the time of Jacob, the main development of the area from a rural hinterland to an ancient city came under Ramses (1304-1227 BC), who ruled about 140 years after the exodus. The city he built became the residence for kings from the 19th dynasty onward. Nevertheless the

name refers to the same area or northeastern Nile delta in Egypt, about 60 miles northeast of modern Cairo.

Notice, too, that the Hebrews are not merely sojourners. They are given property. The word implies a more settled form of habitation. To be sure, these people are still shepherds; they are not building cities. But they are clearly going to stay in Egypt for the foreseeable future. The difference between the visits of Abraham and Jacob to Egypt are clear. Though both went there to escape famine, Abraham engaged in deceit while Jacob gave Pharaoh his blessing. Naturally, then, we should not be surprised that the Pharaoh of Abraham's time was only too happy to see him depart, whereas the Pharaoh of Jacob's day offered them a permanent settlement in the best of the land.

Joseph's Agrarian Program

With Jacob and the family safely settled in Goshen, the biblical account then turned to Joseph's administrative policies designed to stave off the worst of the famine in Egypt and throughout Mesopotamia. The severity of the famine is attested several times in this passage. And, such a testimony serves as a reminder of the accuracy of Joseph's interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams that,

“²⁹Behold, seven years of great abundance are coming in all the land of Egypt; ³⁰and after them seven years of famine will come, and all the abundance will be forgotten in the land of Egypt, and the famine will ravage the land. ³¹So the abundance will be unknown in the land because of that subsequent famine; for it will be very severe” (Genesis 41:29-31).

As the sacred historian recounts it, “¹³now there was no food in all the land, because the famine was very severe, so that the land of Egypt and the land of Canaan languished because of the famine. ¹⁴And Joseph collected all the money that was found in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan in payment for the grain which they bought, and Joseph brought the money into Pharaoh's house” (v. 13-14).

Some points to consider. First, with the patriarch and his family in Egypt, we see that the two regions were blended together into the account of the famine. Scripture now refers to Egypt *and* Canaan. Also, Scripture continues to draw attention to how devastating the famine was. There was “no food” in “all the land” which “languished because of the famine” (v. 13). Though the text states that “there was no food in all the land” (v. 13), that was not quite true. What is meant is that there was no food available to the people except what Joseph had wisely stored up in advance. So as the famine worsened, Joseph began to distribute the food to the people.

But he did not simply give the precious grain away. Instead, Joseph sold food to the starving populations of Egypt and Canaan. As he had been doing for some time, Joseph continued to see to it that the grain he had so wisely saved was sold to the people of Egypt and other lands. That Joseph ‘collected’ all the money in Egypt and Canaan is language that implies that the people had to scrounge through their belongings for every spare coin in order to buy food. The land had produced nothing for a year or two, and Joseph was the sole supplier of the precious grain. And he sold it at a price.

But the famine continued. And the people had given all their money to Joseph to buy food. So, now, Joseph acquired their livestock. “¹⁵When the money was all spent in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan, all the Egyptians came to Joseph saying, ‘give us food, for why should we die in your presence?

For our money is gone. ¹⁶Then Joseph said, ‘give up your livestock, and I will give you food for your livestock, since your money is gone.’ ¹⁷So they brought their livestock to Joseph, and Joseph gave them food in exchange for the horses and the flocks and the herds and the donkeys; and he fed them with food in exchange for all their livestock that year” (v. 15-17).

The duration of the famine exceeded the people’s ability to pay for food. Their next recourse was to sell their tangible possessions. The most valuable of these would have been their livestock, ironically made less valuable by the fact that they were no longer used in agriculture, since the famine had made farming impossible. The selling of their horses was also especially noteworthy, since these were not used in agriculture but rather for war. So we see that even among those of some means (only the upper classes would have possessed war horses) the famine required that they turn to Joseph for survival. Upon acquiring their property Joseph “fed them with food” for the remainder of the year (v. 17).

The people’s money, flocks, and herds safely in his possession, Joseph now took the people’s property, and then he acquired them as slaves.

“¹⁸But when that year ended, they came to him the next year and said to him, ‘we will not hide from my lord the fact that our money is all spent, and the livestock are my lord’s. There is nothing left for my lord except our bodies and our lands. ¹⁹Why should we die before your eyes, both we and our land? Buy us and our land for food, and we and our land will be slaves to Pharaoh. So give us seed, so that we may live and not die, and that the land may not be desolate” (v. 18-19).

Another year had gone by and still the famine continued. It is very likely that those who survived thus far had never experienced such a natural catastrophe in their lifetimes. The people had given Joseph all their money and now they had given him all their livestock. They had no idea how much longer the famine would continue, but Joseph did. Joseph, knowing from God how long the famine would last, was able to wisely allocate the distribution of the grain. But still the people starved. So now they offered their landed property and even themselves as slaves. They had no choice. If such an arrangement was not made, they would “die before your eyes” (v. 19). In exchange they wanted seed. This seems to imply that the supply of grain Joseph had set aside was running out. For their money they had been given grain (v. 14) and for their livestock they had received food (v. 16). Now they received only seed (v. 19).

“²⁰So Joseph bought all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh, for every Egyptian sold his field, because the famine was severe upon them. So the land became Pharaoh’s. ²¹As for the people, he relocated them to the cities from one end of Egypt’s border to the other. ²²Only the land of the priests he did not buy, because the priests had an allotment from Pharaoh, and they lived off the allotment which Pharaoh gave them. Therefore, they did not sell their land” (v. 20-22).

The outcome of all these transactions was that “all the land of Egypt” passed into the possession of Pharaoh. And Joseph then reassigned the people to different parts of Egypt. This may indicate that he was using them to work areas of Egypt where cultivation was still possible. With all of the livestock at his disposal, Joseph began to organize the collective farming of the parched land of Egypt to help augment his dwindling grain supplies.

The pagan priests of Egypt were not subject to this. Much like the Levites and priests of Israel, they were supported by the state (Numbers 18:21-32). Also, we may assume that Jacob and his family were insulated from all of this. Under the protection of Joseph, they were not subject to these harsh effects of the famine. They did not lose their land, and they were not (yet) to be subjected to slavery.

The last of the administrative measures adopted by Joseph during the famine was to tax the people.

“²³Then Joseph said to the people, ‘behold, today I have purchased you and your land for Pharaoh; now, here is seed for you, and you may sow the land. ²⁴At the harvest you shall give a fifth to Pharaoh, and four-fifths shall be your own for seed of the field and for your food, and for those of your households and as food for your little ones.’ ²⁵So they said, ‘you have saved our lives! Let us find favor in the sight of my lord, and we will be Pharaoh’s slaves.’ ²⁶Joseph made it a statute concerning the land of Egypt, valid to this day, that Pharaoh was to have the fifth; only the land of the priests did not become Pharaoh’s” (v. 23-26).

The people had been placed in a state of tenancy to the crown (v. 23). They were to farm the lands to which they had been assigned and, at the end of the year, were to give to Pharaoh twenty percent of the harvested crop. Though they had lost their lands, they were given the opportunity to farm and to survive. Harsh as they were, these reforms met with the approval of the people. We can see that the tax structure stayed in effect until the time of the writing of Genesis, some four hundred years later.

On a historical note, while there is no specific evidence as to a policy put forward during this time in the Egyptian records, there is general agreement between the biblical narrative and known Egyptian agricultural practices. Pharaoh and the temple priests were the primary holders of land during the Middle Kingdom period of ancient Egypt (the chronological setting of the Joseph narrative). We also know that Egyptian Pharaohs regularly imposed taxes on their subjects. And, Egyptian historical documents attest to the fact that often, land held by the priestly class was exempt from such taxation. Finally, while there are no Egyptian records that point to people willingly selling themselves into slavery to avoid starvation during a time of famine, other cultures in Mesopotamia do have documentation that supports such practices.

If the biblical account was imagined by the author, then it is surprising that the practices described were so different from contemporary Hebrew culture. Families in Israel owned and farmed their land independently. One of the threats the prophet made to the people when they insisted on having a king was that such practices would disappear (1 Samuel 8:10-18). Also, the tax (tithe) in Hebrew culture was ten percent, not twenty percent as described in this account. Finally, the year of Jubilee required that all land be returned to original family ownership (Leviticus 25:25-28). So we can conclude that there is no historical reason to doubt the veracity of the biblical narrative and think that it was imposed on the text by a Hebrew scribe.

Another issue to address is the ethics of Joseph’s policy. First, he takes all the money and animals from the people of Egypt and Canaan. Then he takes their land. Finally, he takes their freedom. At the end of the seven years the people had been reduced to a kind of tenancy in which they were given seed to work land that was not theirs and allowed to keep eighty percent of what they produced. Some have argued that such a policy was ungenerous at best, and oppressive at worst.

However, it must be noted that Joseph's policies were incremental and were done at the request of the people. Note that they receive the news that Joseph will take them as slaves with the exultation "you have saved our lives!" (v. 25). Voluntary enslavement in times of famine was not at all uncommon in the ancient world. And Egypt, as well as other Mesopotamian cultures, had laws that regulated such enslavement. These people were not chattel slaves (like foreigners captured in battle, for example) who could be bought and sold at will. They were more similar to Medieval serfs, who worked the land of a lord but had certain legal rights as well. Considering the extensiveness of the famine that had ravaged the land for seven years, being guaranteed survival by laboring on the property of another, was not a bad result.

Takeaways

Throughout the narrative we can see that Joseph recognized that he was God's chosen instrument to save the people of Egypt and Canaan from the effects of the famine. We can recall that when he revealed himself to his brothers he tried to comfort them with the fact that "God sent me ahead of you to save lives" (Genesis 45:5). His plans, perhaps difficult to appreciate from our perspective of affluence, were God-given and designed to mitigate the effects of the greatest natural disaster these people had ever known.

Though we are not necessarily told by God exactly what He plans to do with us, we can know that He plans to do something. Each of us is left here for some purpose. There is something for us to do as a child of God. None of us is here simply for our own benefit. Our purpose may not be as grandiose as saving the nation from famine, but that does not make it any less important. An appropriate question for each of us to consider is: "What are we doing to further the Kingdom of God?" Let us not rest until we are satisfied with our answer.