



Genesis - Chapter Forty Seven

II. Genesis 11:27-50:26 - Patriarchal History (continues)

II.c Genesis 37:1-50:26 - Jacob's Descendants (continues)

II.c.xii Genesis 46:28-47:12 - Jacob Settles in Goshen (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Forty Seven

Joseph brought five of his brothers to be introduced to Pharaoh and when he enquired of their occupation they confirmed they were shepherds as Joseph had instructed them and that they wished to settle as aliens in Egypt due to the famine. Pharaoh told Joseph that, as they were his family, then they could settle in the land of Goshen. When Jacob came before Pharaoh he blessed him twice. Joseph then settled them in Egypt.

As the famine continued the people spent all their money on food from the central stocks that Joseph had set up. When their money had all gone, he took their livestock in exchange for food, and finally, when they had nothing else, their land passed to Pharaoh and the people came into servitude in exchange for food. But they did not die. Only the priests were exempt for this and a tax of twenty per cent of all income to Pharaoh became the standard.

After settling in the land for seventeen years, Jacob called his son Joseph to him and made him promise that his body would be taken back to Canaan and buried there with his ancestors.

¹ So Joseph went and told Pharaoh, 'My father and my brothers, with their flocks and herds and all that they possess, have come from the land of Canaan; they are now in the land of Goshen.'² From among his brothers he took five men and presented them to Pharaoh.³ Pharaoh said to his brothers, 'What is your occupation?' And they said to

Pharaoh, ‘Your servants are shepherds, as our ancestors were.’⁴ They said to Pharaoh, ‘We have come to reside as aliens in the land; for there is no pasture for your servants’ flocks because the famine is severe in the land of Canaan. Now, we ask you, let your servants settle in the land of Goshen.’⁵ Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘Your father and your brothers have come to you.’⁶ The land of Egypt is before you; settle your father and your brothers in the best part of the land; let them live in the land of Goshen; and if you know that there are capable men among them, put them in charge of my livestock.’

Genesis 47:1-6

Having primed his brothers, Joseph introduces five of them to Pharaoh, mentioning that his family is now in the land of Goshen. When his brothers subsequently respond to Pharaoh’s question, they conclude by requesting that they be permitted to settle in the land of Goshen. Pharaoh graciously grants their request: The land of Egypt is before you; settle your father and your brothers in the best part of the land. This blessing was all because of Joseph. He saved Egypt, and much of the surrounding area, from terrible famine, and now the whole family of Israel was blessed and received an inheritance because of Joseph.

There is no pasture for your servants’ flocks because the famine is severe in the land of Canaan. The brothers make it clear that their only reason for requesting a stay in Egypt is the severity of their situation: <<*Even the doe in the field forsakes her newborn fawn because there is no grass. The wild asses stand on the bare heights, they pant for air like jackals; their eyes fail because there is no herbage*>> (Jeremiah 14:5-6), and: <<*How the animals groan! The herds of cattle wander about because there is no pasture for them; even the flocks of sheep are dazed*>> (Joel 1:18). They pose no risk to the land.

If you know that there are capable men among them, put them in charge of my livestock. Pharaoh recognises their expertise with sheep and cattle and so orders that they should care for his animals as well. Based on the success Laban had when Jacob had cared for his flocks then Pharaoh too would prosper from such an arrangement. His request for capable men would include their honesty and integrity as well as ability: <<*Moses chose able men from all Israel and appointed them as heads over the people, as officers over thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens*>> (Exodus 18:25), and: <<*Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right, and speak the truth from their heart*>> (Psalm 15:2).

⁷ Then Joseph brought in his father Jacob, and presented him before Pharaoh, and Jacob blessed Pharaoh. ⁸ Pharaoh said to Jacob, ‘How

many are the years of your life?’⁹ Jacob said to Pharaoh, ‘The years of my earthly sojourn are one hundred and thirty; few and hard have been the years of my life. They do not compare with the years of the life of my ancestors during their long sojourn.’¹⁰ Then Jacob blessed Pharaoh, and went out from the presence of Pharaoh.

Genesis 47:7-10

Joseph introduces his father Jacob to Pharaoh. The record of this meeting is framed by the repeated comment that Jacob blessed Pharaoh (v.7 and v.10). While this could be interpreted as merely denoting words spoken by way of greeting and saying farewell, the image of Jacob blessing Pharaoh takes on special significance when viewed within the context of Genesis as a whole. Genesis presents the special line associated with Abraham and his seed as mediating God’s blessing to others.

Pharaoh acknowledged Jacob was a man of God by accepting his blessing. In the Egyptian religion, Pharaoh himself was thought to be a god. They considered Pharaoh the human embodiment of Ra, the sun god. This means that it was remarkable that he allowed Israel to bestow a blessing on him.

How many are the years of the years of your life? Pharaoh’s inquiry about Jacob’s age may have been motivated by the belief that longevity was a sign of divine favour. He was already one hundred and thirty years old at the time.

Few and hard have been the years of my life. In this response Jacob perhaps alludes to those events that have made his life less than happy, e.g. his treatment of Esau, and his sons’ deception of him regarding Joseph. While Jacob is now one hundred and thirty years old, Abraham and Isaac lived to be one hundred and seventy five and one hundred and eighty , respectively.

They do not compare with the years of the life of my ancestors during their long sojourn. The Hebrew term translated sojourn implies that Jacob and his fathers had no permanent abode. This concept is developed along theological lines by the author of Hebrews, who views the patriarchs as looking forward to inhabiting a <<*the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God*>> (Hebrews 11:10b). Jacob’s comments may indicate that he anticipated something better to come.

¹¹ Joseph settled his father and his brothers, and granted them a holding in the land of Egypt, in the best part of the land, in the land of Rameses, as Pharaoh had instructed. ¹² And Joseph provided his father, his brothers, and all his father’s household with food, according to the number of their dependants.

Genesis 47:11-12

Joseph settled his father and his brothers. The family of Israel looked to Joseph, and Joseph only, as their source of provision and supply, for it was he alone that granted them a holding in the land of Egypt.

Joseph allocates land to his family in the land of Rameses. Previously, the designation 'land of Goshen' has been used to denote the territory where they were to dwell. The name Rameses is most often associated with the great 13th Century BC Egyptian king Rameses II. While it is possible that the actual name Rameses goes back to the time of Joseph, this may be an example of a later term's being substituted for an earlier name as seen by the use of Dan in 14:14. The term would be used again at the time of the exodus: <<*They set out from Rameses in the first month, on the fifteenth day of the first month; on the day after the passover the Israelites went out boldly in the sight of all the Egyptians*>> (Numbers 33:3). There was a city of that name that the Hebrew slaves had helped to build: <<*Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labour. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh*>> (Exodus 1:11).

II.c.xiii Genesis 47:13-26 - The Famine in Egypt

This detailed description of Joseph's handling of the response to the famine in Egypt draws attention to how the lives of the people are saved and how they commit themselves to serving Pharaoh in return to the lifesaving provision of food.

¹³ Now there was no food in all the land, for the famine was very severe. The land of Egypt and the land of Canaan languished because of the famine. ¹⁴ Joseph collected all the money to be found in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan, in exchange for the grain that they bought; and Joseph brought the money into Pharaoh's house.

Genesis 47:13-14

The famine is so severe and prolonged that the Egyptians eventually run out of money to buy grain.

Joseph brought the money into Pharaoh's house. The national treasury was traditionally located either within the palace or the palace grounds. This would be the location where God would have Jeremiah demonstrate against the Jews who fled to Egypt instead of remaining in Judah as he had commanded them. Their fate would be servitude to the Babylonians along with their kinsfolk: <<*Take some large stones in your hands, and bury them in the clay pavement that is at the entrance to Pharaoh's palace in Tahpanhes. Let the Judeans see you do it, and say to them, Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: I am going to*>>

send and take my servant King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon, and he will set his throne above these stones that I have buried, and he will spread his royal canopy over them. He shall come and ravage the land of Egypt, giving those who are destined for pestilence, to pestilence, and those who are destined for captivity, to captivity, and those who are destined for the sword, to the sword>> (Jeremiah 43:9-11).

¹⁵ When the money from the land of Egypt and from the land of Canaan was spent, all the Egyptians came to Joseph, and said, ‘Give us food! Why should we die before your eyes? For our money is gone.’ ¹⁶ And Joseph answered, ‘Give me your livestock, and I will give you food in exchange for your livestock, if your money is gone.’ ¹⁷ So they brought their livestock to Joseph; and Joseph gave them food in exchange for the horses, the flocks, the herds, and the donkeys. That year he supplied them with food in exchange for all their livestock.

Genesis 47:15-17

Give us food! Why should we die before your eyes? When all their money is gone, the Egyptians appeal to Joseph for help. He responds by offering to buy their livestock. This sustains the Egyptians for another year.

¹⁸ When that year was ended, they came to him the following year, and said to him, ‘We cannot hide from my lord that our money is all spent; and the herds of cattle are my lord’s. There is nothing left in the sight of my lord but our bodies and our lands. ¹⁹ Shall we die before your eyes, both we and our land? Buy us and our land in exchange for food. We with our land will become slaves to Pharaoh; just give us seed, so that we may live and not die, and that the land may not become desolate.’ ²⁰ So Joseph bought all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh. All the Egyptians sold their fields, because the famine was severe upon them; and the land became Pharaoh’s. ²¹ As for the people, he made slaves of them from one end of Egypt to the other. ²² Only the land of the priests he did not buy; for the priests had a fixed allowance from Pharaoh, and lived on the allowance that Pharaoh gave them; therefore they did not sell their land. ²³ Then Joseph said to the people, ‘Now that I have this day bought you and your land for Pharaoh, here is seed for you; sow the land. ²⁴ And at the harvests you shall give one-fifth to Pharaoh, and four-fifths shall be your own, as seed for the field and as food for yourselves and your households, and

as food for your little ones.’²⁵ They said, ‘You have saved our lives; may it please my lord, we will be slaves to Pharaoh.’²⁶ So Joseph made it a statute concerning the land of Egypt, and it stands to this day, that Pharaoh should have the fifth. The land of the priests alone did not become Pharaoh’s.

Genesis 47:18-26

With no money and no livestock, the Egyptians resort to selling their land and themselves, as debt-slaves, to Pharaoh. They also ask for seed in order to sustain themselves for the future: <<*For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater*>> (Isaiah 55:10), and: <<*There were also those who said, ‘We are having to pledge our fields, our vineyards, and our houses in order to get grain during the famine’*>> (Nehemiah 5:3). Joseph willingly grants these requests. While some scholars believe that Joseph exploits the people’s poverty, the response of the people: You have saved our lives, shows that in these terrible circumstances the Egyptians view Joseph positively. From their perspective, Joseph provides seed on the understanding that they may keep for themselves four-fifths of the harvest. While Pharaoh’s share of one-fifth may seem excessive, this must be viewed in light of the people’s having no other means of sustaining themselves. In such circumstances a less scrupulous administrator might have placed an even heavier burden on the poor.

So the land became Pharaoh’s. In the process, the power and wealth of Pharaoh was multiplied greatly. In times of national crisis the power of central government often increases. Although western democracies would say their primary duty is the care and welfare of their people, national disasters often make the poor poorer and the rich wealthier and even more powerful.

II.c.xiv Genesis 47:27-31 - The Last Days of Jacob

While the Egyptians struggle to survive during the famine, Jacob’s family is portrayed as growing and prospering. Jacob’s request to be buried in Canaan emphasises that the family’s future lies there and not in Egypt.

²⁷ Thus Israel settled in the land of Egypt, in the region of Goshen; and they gained possessions in it, and were fruitful and multiplied exceedingly.

Genesis 47:27

They gained possessions in it, and were fruitful and multiplied exceedingly. This brief statement encapsulates the positive experience of Jacob’s family in

Egypt. The motif of being fruitful and multiplying first appears in 1:22 and recurs throughout Genesis, usually in association with divine blessing.

²⁸ Jacob lived in the land of Egypt for seventeen years; so the days of Jacob, the years of his life, were one hundred and forty-seven years.

²⁹ When the time of Israel's death drew near, he called his son Joseph and said to him, 'If I have found favour with you, put your hand under my thigh and promise to deal loyally and truly with me. Do not bury me in Egypt. ³⁰ When I lie down with my ancestors, carry me out of Egypt and bury me in their burial place.' He answered, 'I will do as you have said.' ³¹ And he said, 'Swear to me'; and he swore to him. Then Israel bowed himself on the head of his bed.

Genesis 47:28-31

Jacob's imminent death, at the age of one hundred and forty-seven, dominates the final episodes of Genesis. His desire to be buried in Canaan is later fulfilled, a detailed description being given in 49:29-50:14.

Put your hand under my thigh. This was clearly a practice that verified the person's intent to do what was promised, as Abraham's servant had done when he was tasked with finding a wife for Isaac. Refer to the comment made on 24:9.

Israel bowed himself upon the head of his bed. Jacob bows, possibly in worship, or possibly in gratitude to Joseph, which would fulfil Joseph's predictive dream in 37:9-11, or possibly because of frailty. By not explaining why Jacob bowed, Genesis allows all these interpretations. Hebrews 11:21 refers to this, citing the Septuagint, which has Jacob bowing on 'the head of his staff'. The difference between the words in Hebrew is very small, since the original language had only consonants and no vowels: Hebrew *hammittah* is the bed, while *hammatteh* is the staff.