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The Family of Abraham: Part 37—The Continuing Famine and Joseph's Promise to His Father

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I discuss Genesis 47, as Joseph introduces Pharaoh to his brothers and father, we hear the continued events of the famine, and Joseph promises to bury Jacob in Canaan.

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Transcript

Welcome back to this, the 37th in my series on the story of the family of Abraham. Today, we're looking at chapter 47 of the book of Genesis, in which Joseph presents some of his brothers to Pharaoh. Jacob meets and blesses Pharaoh.

We hear the continued events of the famine. And finally, Joseph is requested by Jacob, his father, to bury him in the land of Canaan. This story continues neatly from the previous chapter, in which Joseph speaks of his plan to them to sojourn in the land of Goshen.

They're already sojourning in that location, and they're presented before Pharaoh—five

of them—presumably to represent the strength of them as a people. They would have five of the chief brothers that Joseph would present, and they would represent the whole of the nation, or the clan, as it were. Now, presumably, they had other people with them at this point.

As we've seen throughout this story, they have significant flocks and herds, and presumably a great many servants and others working for them. Many people within the sheikdom that surround them. And just as we saw in the case of Abraham, who had 318 fighting men, they probably had a considerable contingent of people.

If they were settling in the land of Goshen, it would be with a large multitude, probably some few thousands. This is not just 70 people. Seventy people are at the heart of the nation, but presumably there are many others besides.

Reading through this, then, they are presented to Pharaoh, the five of them, and then later on, Jacob meets Pharaoh and blesses him. He is brought in by Joseph, set before Pharaoh, and Jacob blesses him. In their encounter with the brothers, Joseph is the one that Pharaoh speaks to in answering the brothers, whereas he speaks more directly with Jacob.

And Jacob is treated, as it were, as a father, as someone who blesses Pharaoh as if as a son. Pharaoh asks the age of Jacob, and Jacob mentions that his years of his pilgrimage are 130 years, few and evil, or the days of his life, years of his life, and have not attained the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their pilgrimage. Jacob's story, even though it is coming to a more settled rest, is still colored by tragedy.

His story was a very sorrowful one, one in which he was struggling for all of his life, struggling with his brother Esau, struggling with his father Isaac, who favored his brother over himself, struggling with Laban, his uncle, struggling with the situation in his family and his sons that sought to rebel against him, struggling with mourning the loss of his son Joseph, his favored son, and then all these other events that have occurred, and now most recently the famine. His years have been difficult ones, but yet God has been active within his life in a profound way. He has wrestled with God, and God will bless him and make him great, but yet it is through a painful experience.

Jacob blesses Pharaoh and then goes out, and then Joseph situates his fathers and his brothers in the land of Egypt in the area of Ramses, which is near the area of Goshen, and that's according to Pharaoh's command. He provides his father, brothers, and all his household with bread according to the number of their families. Settling them in the land of Goshen as shepherds, they're distinguished from the rest of the Egyptians, which ensures that they won't just assimilate, that they just won't get lost in the larger population.

They are going to keep something of their distinctiveness even in the land of Egypt, and

it's important to have a land in which they can sojourn of their own, and this land of Goshen is some of the best land of Egypt. It's also a place where they can remain distinct from the rest of the people. Pharaoh also offers to set some of Joseph's brothers, if they had any particular gifted and competent men among them, over his own livestock and be chief herdsman and things like that.

It was a sign of, first of all, his trust for them, but also it reminds you of the story of Laban, but with a very different flavour to it. They're sojourning within a land, taking refuge, but they're being treated very favourably. They're given the very best of the land.

Joseph has the second most important position in the land, and they enjoy the trust of Pharaoh and positions of authority. Presumably he's seen, with his experience of Joseph, how God has blessed this people, and he believes that he's presumably going to bless the other brothers too, and so he wants such competent and wise people over his property. There was no bread in all the land, for the famine was very severe, so that all the land of Egypt and all the land of Canaan languished because of the famine.

And Joseph gathers all the money that was found in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan for the grain which they bought, and Joseph brought the money into Pharaoh's house. Reading this, I think you can see that the suggestion is that there's a famine in both Egypt and Canaan, but Egypt and Canaan have very different forms of agriculture. Egypt depends upon the Nile, whereas Canaan would depend upon the rains.

So this is a famine that's widespread and presumably depends upon different mechanisms going wrong. This is a more general struggle within the earth. Presumably Canaan is under Egyptian dominance at the moment, maybe tributaries and others in that region, but both Egypt and Canaan are experiencing a failure in their agricultural systems.

And so they all come to Joseph and they give their money, and they run out of money. He's collected all the money within the land. The money fails in the land and then the Egyptians came to Joseph and said, give us bread, for why should we die in your presence, for the money has failed.

Then Joseph said, give your livestock and I will give you bread for your livestock if the money is gone. And so they give Joseph their livestock, and then Joseph takes their livestock and gives them bread in exchange for their horses, flocks, cattle of the herds and the donkeys. And then that's another year that passes.

And then when that year ends, they come to him the next year and say that their money has gone, their livestock has gone, and now they have nothing left but their land and their bodies. And so they give their lands and their bodies to Pharaoh as his servants. And Pharaoh gives them seed that they may live and that the land not be desolate.

So Joseph through this buys all of the livestock, gathers all of the money and gains all of the people of the land as servants of Pharaoh. And all the land of Pharaoh, all the land of Egypt now belongs to Pharaoh. And so there's a more general decapitalization of the people of Egypt as they depend upon Pharaoh for their provision.

The shrewdness of Joseph has provided for the years of the famine in a way that the Egyptians themselves could not provide. They were not effective in laying up for those years. So they depend upon Pharaoh to buy all their property, to buy their cattle, to buy their, they give him all their money, and eventually they're just left as dependents upon Pharaoh as his. Now we can see this as a very negative thing, but the Egyptians don't.

They see this as Joseph being their saviour. What is the choice? The choice is between dying of famine or being protected by someone who's provident. And Joseph is someone who's provident, who's provided through the mechanism of the state provision for all these years of famine.

And so as they ally them, as they serve Pharaoh, and as they serve Joseph, they're protected. They're given security against the years of the famine. Now it's not as if they don't have any property to work on.

They're working as Pharaoh's servants, but they're working on land that they still control 80% of it. They have to give 20% to Pharaoh year on year, but they still control most of that land and its produce. And so it's not a bad deal considering that the alternative is losing their lives.

Obviously this is not the ideal situation. This is not something that is a positive situation. Ideally you'd want the capital of the land to be spread widely within scripture.

The ideal is that every man is under his own vine and fig tree. Now what's the point of that? It's not just that you have nice shade, it's that you have your productive property. You're not just working for Big Fig Incorporated and Megavine.

You are in your own vineyard, you have your own fig trees, and you have your own productive property. And so you're not just dependent upon the state, you're not just dependent upon big business and working as a wage slave or working as someone who is a serf of the. Neither of those situations are ideal, but yet they're a lot better than being dead. And the situation here in Egypt was such that the severity of the famine meant that because of the providence of Joseph, the state was in a position to rescue people's lives.

And that was a good thing. And often people within a certain brand of reformed thought, theologians and others, can see any sort of central planning by the state as a negative thing, a statism. But there are occasions when it's appropriate and necessary, and a great deal better than dying by famine or some other thing.

Often we need big organisations to establish providence in situations where small organisations would not be equipped to deal with big shocks and eventualities that we're just not equipped for. And so in an ideal society, you ensure that the population is not radically capitalised, and you want to ensure that property is returned to the people. But it can make sense for certain things to be in the hands of bigger businesses, in the hands of the state, in the other agencies that collect and are able to act on a larger level of central planning, that enables them to work with greater foresight towards the future, that also enables them to bear certain bigger shocks, for instance, of a natural disaster, if there was a tsunami within your region or a great volcano or something like that.

Having these bigger organisations enables people to get back on their feet again and recapitalise. So this is not a negative situation. But when we look at the situation of the Israelites at the beginning of the Book of Exodus, we can see that maybe part of what Joseph is doing here is setting the conditions in which Israel themselves will find themselves enslaved and servants to Pharaoh at the beginning of the Book of Exodus.

And so the state has become very powerful, and it's a lot more centralised than it probably ought to be. And because the whole people are serfs of the state, when we talk about Egypt as a house of bondage, we shouldn't think of it just as a house of bondage for the Israelites. It's a house of bondage for everyone.

It's a more general state of servitude. And God's ideal is to bring Israel into a land of its own, where they enjoy capital of their own, and they are not ultimately dispossessed. As we look through the law later on, we'll see that this is part of the intent of it.

In places like Leviticus 25, you have the laws concerning slavery. There is a gracious character to someone coming into slavery in the situation of debt. They're provided for by someone else, and they have security.

They don't have to worry so much. And that can be a positive situation. Now, we tend to think of slavery in the context of the slavery of the American South, and that is a very different sort of slavery.

This is the sort of slavery that enables people to have a safety net. When everything else fails, there is something that can support you, and that is selling yourself to a and they provide for you when you can't provide for yourself. Obviously, this is not an ideal situation.

And so the biblical law tries to provide for land to be restored to people after a certain period of time, and slaves to be set free after a particular period of time. So there's only so much time that they have to serve to pay off their debts. At a certain point, they're just set free.

And that creates a situation where the people are constantly being recapitalized. If

they've been decapitalized, they're not finally decapitalized. Whereas Egypt and foreigners within Israel could be decapitalized in a far more radical way.

And this situation that we see here, I think, sows some of the seeds for the problems that we see at the beginning of the book of Exodus. The other thing to notice is that throughout this story, Joseph has been this faithful right-hand man. He's the gifted administrator.

He's the one who can rule on account for the king. He can be the person who runs things for his father, his right-hand son, his firstborn. He can be the chief servant of Potiphar.

He can be the one who's set over all the prisoners within the prison by the keeper of the prison. He can be the one who's set at Pharaoh's right hand. And in each of these positions, he's working for masters who, or a father, who are, for the most part, pretty good.

And they're doing things that are concerned with the well-being of those beneath their charge. But what happens when Joseph is called to serve a master who is not such a good master, a master who is oppressive? Well, when you have such an effective bureaucratic state, such a state that's centralized and powerful, when that power falls into the hands of a Pharaoh who does not know Joseph, the people are in trouble. The people face the power of an immensely centralized and powerful state that can use that power to oppress them.

And so within Israel, the ideal is to ensure that capital is widely spread. It's not centered in the hands of either the state, particular corporations, or something else like that. Everyone in the ideal world sits under their own vine and their own fig tree.

They all enjoy productive capital. And it is not ultimately sold and alienated from them. This then is a situation that helps us see some of the limitations of the skills of someone like Joseph.

Joseph is great as the administrator of a faithful person, of a ruler that's trying to provide for the well-being of his people, of a master who's a good master and wants to run his house in a righteous and effective way. He's very good as someone who's looking after the interests of people within a prison. He's very, maybe slightly less good as the firstborn exercising authority under his father.

But in all of these positions, he has a limitation. And yet when we come to the book of Exodus, it's not a Joseph type character that stands up. It's Levi and Moses.

That part of the family is the one that acts. The part of the family characterized by zeal and the ability to uphold boundaries and establish clear lines and to struggle and to use violence in certain cases where it needs to be used through zeal. And Joseph's limitations, I think, come out at that point.

So when we're reading this narrative, I think Yoram Hazony is very good on this, we need to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of a character like Joseph, that these gifts are fantastic when they're used under a righteous ruler. And in other cases, they can just lead to a situation that's ripe for oppression. The slavery here, however, is not oppression.

They're reduced to a sort of serfdom, but that serfdom protects their lives. It saves them from destruction. And it's presented as a positive thing.

As we read on, we can see maybe there's a pattern. James Jordan has suggested that we see a movement from silver and gold to livestock to persons and land. Now, maybe there is a connection.

We're dealing with different years, year upon year. Maybe those years are associated with days, days of creation. So the first year referenced here is the fourth year of creation.

So maybe the fourth year of the famine, which is associated with lights in the heavens, which are in turn associated with money. The next year, livestock and creatures associated with the fifth day, and then maybe the next year associated with mankind. And that, of course, the sixth day corresponds to the third day.

It's the day in which the land is filled. So maybe that's what's going on. I don't know.

It's a possibility. It's intriguing. And it may help us to work out which year of the famine we're referring to through this.

There are certain things that would not match quite so neatly. For instance, it's the livestock that are sold in the fifth year or the fifth day, and that's associated with the birds and the fish. So maybe not quite a neat match, but possibility.

And it's worth thinking about. Joseph makes this a law of the land of Egypt that Pharaoh should have one fifth, except for the land of the priests only, which did not become Pharaoh's. Now within scripture, I think we see different rates of taxation.

There's not a standard rate of taxation that must, that kings have a certain degree of prudence in determining what is an appropriate rate of taxation. When we look in the law, I think there are concerns about the way in which kings will accumulate money. In 1 Samuel 8, there's the warning given to Israel of what will happen if they choose a king for themselves and how that king might be oppressive and gather money and other people from the land, the daughters and the sons to do different tasks and form military might and gather chariots and other things like that.

These are all concerns that are dealt with also in the book of Deuteronomy in the law concerning the king. What else we see here, is the way that through his power over the

Egyptians as effectively serves the Pharaoh now, he is able to relocate people. So there's a certain urbanization project that I think Joseph has.

So presumably many of them are left within the land to serve the land, to make sure that it's fruitful, but then a number of others are brought into the cities. And that seems to be what's referred to in these verses in verse 21 in particular, that people are moved into the cities and there's some sort of urbanization project, building projects and other things like that that are going on. Now this chapter ends with Jacob speaking to Joseph.

So Jacob's life is 147 years, maximum break, although that's not the symbolism. The time comes near that he must die and he called Joseph to him and said to him, now if I am found favour in your sight, please put your hand under my thigh and deal kindly and truly with me. Please do not bury me in Egypt, but let me lie with my fathers.

You shall carry me out of Egypt and bury me in their burial place. And he said, I will do as you have said. Now this is something that we see increasingly towards the end of this book, this emphasis upon dying, upon blessing and upon burial.

The significance of burial is very important in both the story of Jacob and the story of Joseph. These burials are burials that are significant, that they are signs of promise that Israel will eventually be restored to the land of Canaan. They will settle there.

But it's also, it is a promise that says something more. As we've read through this story, I've already mentioned that Joseph was the right hand man for a number of people. He was the firstborn, as it were, of his father.

He was the right hand man, the chief steward and servant of Potiphar. He was the one who was raised up by the keeper of the prison and then he became the right hand man of Pharaoh. And as we've read this, I've already noted that we see a parallel between Pharaoh and Jacob.

They're both like father figures to Joseph. And at this point, it might seem that the two come into collision. Jacob is the father of the saviour of Egypt.

Presumably, Pharaoh would want for him to be buried in a place of state even, in the context of Egypt itself, maybe in some great royal tomb, maybe in some other official location, some sign of the honour within which this man was held. But yet, Jacob wants to be buried in the land of Canaan with his family. That is a very serious break with the wishes of Pharaoh.

And Joseph is caught between the two of them. Is Joseph going to be faithful to his father Pharaoh and try and make sure that everything is in keeping with Pharaoh's desires? Or is he going to be one who obeys his father Jacob's wishes? He's caught between the two. Now, Jacob at this point may wonder, with whom is Joseph's primary loyalty? He left me many, many years ago.

He's pleased to see me again, but is Pharaoh his true father now? Has he bonded himself to Pharaoh far more to me? And it's at this sort of point that we see the question being answered. Is Joseph a faithful son to Jacob? Or is he primarily on the side of Pharaoh? Is he someone who's a true son of the covenant? Or is he someone who is now being thoroughly Egyptianised? As we look back through the story, he's married the daughter of an Egyptian priest. He's had children in Egypt.

He's settled in Egypt. Is he going to just identify with the Egyptians and become just another one of them? Or is he going to identify with Jacob himself, with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the people of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? Who are his real people? Who is his true father? And it's this question that Joseph's response and willingness to vow to bury Jacob in the land of his fathers, that testifies to his sense of his true identity. That although he's spent all these years in Egypt, he's forgotten the land of his trouble in Canaan, as he has Ephraim and Manasseh.

Even as all that has happened, he is now able to recognise that that is primarily where he's from. That's primarily where he belongs. All the joy and prominence and fruitfulness that he has enjoyed in the land of Egypt is of relatively minor importance compared to his belonging to the covenant people and that destiny that he has with them.

In the book of Hebrews, we read about the way that Moses was prepared to count as nothing all the treasures of Egypt, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt, for he looked towards the reward. By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king. In the story of Jacob, we're seeing Jacob and Joseph here.

I think we're seeing something similar, that Joseph is prepared to honour the wishes of his father over the wishes of the king, and he's prepared to esteem being part of the chosen people and being bound to the promised land as far more than all the treasures that he has in Egypt, all the influence and the power that he has in Egypt. He is the prince of Egypt long before Moses rises to any prominence, and Moses has far less prominence than Joseph. But yet Joseph is prepared to leave that all behind.

Later on we'll see he himself wants to be buried in the land of Egypt, but then taken up to Canaan when they leave. This then, I think, helps us to see some of the themes of the story that have been playing since chapter 37, reaching a fuller conclusion. Joseph is the true son.

Joseph is faithful to Jacob, and even though Jacob has not heard any word from him, even though they've been separated for all those period of the years of his slavery, of the 13 years when he was working for Potiphar and then in the prison, and in the years of the plenty and the famine that followed, the nine years or so after that, in all that time that bond between father and son has not been extinguished. And even though it seemed, appeared to the reader and maybe to Joseph and to Jacob themselves, that there was a bond that had been breached, they are brought back together and Jacob finds a true son

in Joseph. Thank you very much for listening.

Lord willing, I'll be back again tomorrow with a discussion of chapter 48. We're really in the finishing straight now. If you have any questions, please leave them on my Curious Cat account.

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