

Genesis 46:31-47:26 – Israel Settles in Egypt

Review

Last time, we saw that Joseph finally revealed his identity to his brothers after they returned with his younger brother Benjamin to buy grain. Joseph then told them to hurry back to Canaan and bring Jacob and the entire family to Egypt. Although the Biblical text mentions by name only 70 Israelites who eventually settled in Egypt, there must also have been women in the party who are not mentioned. When Israel arrived in Egypt, Joseph met him and the family then continued to the land of Goshen.

Israel Settles in Goshen

Look again at the Lower Egypt map.



Lower Egypt

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There is an excellent article about the land of Goshen and its name in the Jewish Encyclopedia.

Hirsch, Emil G.; Muller, W. (1906) "Goshen". In Singer, Isidore; et al., eds. The Jewish Encyclopedia. Vol. 6. New York: Funk & Wagnalls. p. 50. (<https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/6819-goshen>)

Although the land of Goshen was in the vicinity of the richly fertile Nile delta, the annual Nile floods didn't reach consistently into the land of Goshen, making the area unsuitable for agriculture. However, Goshen did offer sufficient pasture for large herds of livestock.

31 Joseph said to his brothers and to his father's household, "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. 32 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.' 33 When Pharaoh calls you and says, 'What is your occupation?' 34 you shall say, 'Your servants have been keepers of livestock from our youth even until now, both we and our fathers,' in order that you may dwell in the land of Goshen, for every shepherd is an abomination to the Egyptians." Genesis 46:31-34 (ESV)

Joseph was the top administrator in the Egyptian government with complete understanding of the Egyptian economy and population. He therefore knew that the land of Goshen would be a perfect place for herdsmen like his family to live and set about arranging things so that Pharaoh would agree and direct them to go there.

The Egyptians may have abhorred shepherds for dietary, religious, or cultural reasons.

- Some historians have proposed that the Egyptians were vegetarians and abhorred the eating of meat. However, we know for certain the Egyptians of Joseph's time did raise livestock particularly cattle. That would beg the question why they raised animals if not to eat.
- The Egyptians may have found Hebrew shepherds in particular offensive given that the Hebrews sacrificed animals as burnt offerings to God. Some animals were considered sacred by the Egyptians, so sacrificing them would have been sacrilege to the Egyptians.
- Egypt was a settled agrarian society with each person having strong ties to the land. The Egyptians were also deeply nationalistic and xenophobic, tending to have a haughty and distrusting attitude toward foreigners. Conversely, the Hebrew herdsmen were nomadic – living in tents and moving with their flocks and herds as the availability of water and pasture dictated. The Egyptians considered such nomads uncivilized.

A more thorough treatment of this subject may be found at <https://armstronginstitute.org/821-every-shepherd-is-an-abomination-unto-the-egyptians>.

But whatever the reasons the Egyptians abhorred shepherds, Joseph was aware of it and turned it to his family's advantage.

1 So Joseph went in 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 And from among his

Genesis 46:31-47:26 – Israel Settles in Egypt

brothers he took five men and presented them to Pharaoh. 3Pharaoh said to his brothers, “What is your occupation?” And they said to Pharaoh, “Your servants are shepherds, as our fathers were.” 4They said to Pharaoh, “We have come to sojourn in the land, for there is no pasture for your servants’ flocks, for the famine is severe in the land of Canaan. And now, please let your servants dwell in the land of Goshen.” 5Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Your father and your brothers have come to you. 6The land of Egypt is before you. Settle your father and your brothers in the best of the land. Let them settle in the land of Goshen, and if you know any able men among them, put them in charge of my livestock.” Genesis 47:1-6 (ESV)

If Pharaoh personally abhorred shepherds, he didn't let on. After all, he most certainly knew that Joseph his most trusted deputy had come from a family of nomadic herdsmen. Clearly Pharaoh also realized that Goshen was the best place for them to live in Egypt. Furthermore, it was a win-win for Pharaoh, since he could hire the Hebrew shepherds to tend his own livestock.

Behind the scenes of course, God Almighty had been directing the events in the lives of the Israelite people all along, beginning with His calling of Abram to leave Ur of the Chaldeans and journey to the land of Canaan (Genesis 11).

7Then Joseph brought in Jacob his father and stood him before Pharaoh, and Jacob blessed Pharaoh. 8And Pharaoh said to Jacob, “How many are the days of the years of your life?” 9And Jacob said to Pharaoh, “The days of the years of my sojourning are 130 years. Few and evil [עַרְאָ] have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not attained to the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their sojourning.” 10And Jacob blessed Pharaoh and went out from the presence of Pharaoh. Genesis

47:7-10 (ESV)

The Hebrew **עַרְאָ** translated as “evil” by the ESV and most other English translations can also mean unpleasant or difficult. It is sad that Jacob looked back on his life this way. After all, God had visited Jacob on several occasions reiterating the promise He made to Abraham to give Canaan to his descendants as an everlasting possession. Furthermore, God had blessed Jacob with wives, children, grandchildren and wealth. What more did Jacob expect out of his life?

These verses are also intriguing in that Jacob blessed Pharaoh rather than vice versa. After all, Pharaoh was certainly the most powerful person in Egypt and throughout the region at the time. Yet here a lowly herdsman blessed him. The greater almost universally blesses the lesser. Yet Pharaoh tacitly accepted Jacob's blessing and made polite inquiry about Jacob's life. Perhaps Pharaoh deferred simply to Jacob's age. Jacob's own blunt statement that he had not attained to the years of his fathers was certainly true, but at 130 Jacob too had lived a long, full life.

Deference to our elders simply because they are our elders is a time-honored (nyuk, nyuk, nyuk) principle that has fallen out of favor in modern society, particularly in the west. It might be well if we brought it back into vogue.

11Then Joseph settled his father and his brothers and gave them a possession in the land of Egypt, in the best of the land, in the land of

Genesis 46:31-47:26 – Israel Settles in Egypt

Rameses, as Pharaoh had commanded. 12And Joseph provided his father, his brothers, and all his father's household with food, according to the number of their dependents. Genesis 46:11-12 (ESV)

Rameses was the capital city of Egypt in Joseph's time. As noted on the Lower Egypt map, Rameses was just to the northwest of the land of Goshen on the easternmost branch of the Nile delta.

The Famine Continues

Over the course of the remaining five years of famine, Joseph acting in Pharaoh's behalf nationalized the entire economy of Egypt, beginning with the people's money.

13Now there was no food in all the land, for the famine was very severe, so that the land of Egypt and the land of Canaan languished by reason of the famine. 14And Joseph gathered up all the money that was 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 (ESV)

Note that the Egyptians in Joseph's time did not use struck coinage like we would normally associate with money. The "money" referred to here was precious metal (usually silver) by weight.

15And when the money was all spent in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan, all the Egyptians came to Joseph and said, "Give us food. Why should we die before your eyes? For our money is gone." 16And Joseph answered, "Give your livestock, and I will give you food in exchange for your livestock, if your money is gone." 17So they brought their livestock to Joseph, and Joseph gave them food in exchange for the horses, the flocks, the herds, and the donkeys. He supplied them with food in exchange for all their livestock that year. Genesis 47:15-17 (ESV)

I must admit I'm confused why Joseph and Pharaoh would want to take livestock in exchange for the food stored during the seven years of plenty. To my mind, owning livestock during the famine would have been a liability rather than an asset. In fact, since the livestock also needed food and water it represented an expense rather than an income to Pharaoh's coffers. Perhaps the livestock taken in payment was slaughtered and the meat preserved by drying or salting, with perhaps a small remnant kept alive as breeding stock once the famine came to an end.

18And when that year was ended, they came to him the following year and said to him, "We will not hide from my lord that our money is all spent. The herds of livestock are my lord's. There is nothing left in the sight of my lord but our bodies and our land. 19Why should we die before your eyes, both we and our land? Buy us and our land for food, and we with our land will be servants to Pharaoh. And give us seed that we may live and not die, and that the land may not be desolate." 20So Joseph bought all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh, for all the Egyptians sold their fields, because the famine was severe on them. The land became Pharaoh's. Genesis 47:18-20 (ESV)

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It's not clear from the Biblical account just what caused the seven-year famine in Egypt and Canaan. Perhaps, there was a prolonged drought. The region of the eastern Mediterranean is arid in the best of times. A multi-year drought would have devastated the land. Nevertheless, the soil remained fertile. All that was needed was water. Knowing that the drought would not last forever, Joseph and Pharaoh nationalized all the land of Egypt against the coming day when the rain and snow in the mountains of the upper Nile valley would return, and with them the annual flooding of the Nile which made the land fertile again.

²¹As for the people, he made servants of them from one end of Egypt to the other. ²²Only 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. ²³Then Joseph said to the people, “Behold, I have this day bought you and your land for Pharaoh. Now here is seed for you, and you shall sow the land. ²⁴And at the harvests you shall give a 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.” ²⁵And they said, “You have saved our lives; may it please my lord, we will be servants to Pharaoh.” ²⁶So 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 47:21-26 (ESV)

The last step in Pharaoh's nationalization of the Egyptian economy was this statute that made all the people sharecroppers instead of independent landowners. All the land of Egypt became Pharaoh's except what was owned by the priests. The people were allowed to live on the land and work it, receiving its produce on condition that 20% went to Pharaoh first. Notice that this statute applied to the Hebrews of Joseph's family as well as to the native Egyptians. Later, the Hebrews became outright slaves, working on Pharaoh's public building projects. They continued to manage their flocks and herds, but one fifth of the livelihood derived from them went to Pharaoh.

Looking Ahead

Next time we'll look at the final years of Jacob's life in Egypt and the dying blessings he bestowed upon his grandsons Ephraim and Manasseh.