

Few and Evil, the Days of our Sojourning (Gen. 46:28–47:12)

By Jacob Gerber

Now that all of Joseph's family, including Jacob, knows that Joseph is alive, the nation of Israel begins the journey down to Egypt. This is a massive journey, with massive implications that will play out over the next four centuries in the history of the nation. First things must come first, however. In this section, we see the long-awaited reunion between Jacob and Joseph, more than two decades since they were separated from one another. Then, we see the plan come together for settling the nation of Israel in the land of Goshen, where Joseph will provide for his family as they ride out the rest of the famine. The striking theme that comes up in this passage in a variety of ways builds off the theme from the last passage, where we saw that Israel was headed down to Egypt as a nation. Here, we see that this nation will not be a nation that rises to the pinnacle of earthly power, privilege, and prestige. Rather, this will be a nation that will continue as a sojourner, as they have been since Abraham began sojourning in Canaan so many years ago. Nevertheless, despite their precarious position, this passage also demonstrates that *God makes sojourners into superiors*.

Sending and Reconciling (Gen. 46:28–34)

As the caravan of seventy persons begins their journey down to Egypt, Jacob sends Judah ahead to Joseph, in order to lead the way to Goshen (Gen. 46:28). At the beginning of the Joseph narratives, Judah had been the one to offer the plan that separated Jacob from Joseph (Gen. 37:26ff), and now Judah takes the lead in reuniting Jacob with Joseph.¹ Although we read nothing else directly about the significance of Judah's trailblazing here, sending Judah ahead has significance in the broader context of Scripture for Judah and for Jacob. For Judah, this becomes another example of how the author of Genesis singles him out for special attention, signaling his priority of place as the ancestor of the coming King David.² Joseph's character is unwavering in these narratives, but God has selected Judah to be the one from whom kings will come for the nation of Israel (cf. Gen. 49:10). It may also be significant that, in the wilderness, Judah became the tribe who led the nation when they journeyed from place to place (Num. 2:9; 10:14).

For Jacob, sending Judah ahead of him echoes a story from long ago in the patriarch's past. Earlier, when Jacob had been reunited with Esau, he sent messengers from his family ahead of him to his estranged brother (Gen. 32:3).³ In fact, there are a number of echoes here of the story of Jacob's

¹ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 601; Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 444; Mathews, *Genesis 11*, 1B:841.

² Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 226.

³ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 601.

reunion with Esau.⁴ First, the language of Joseph’s falling on Jacob’s neck and weeping is very close to the description of how Esau fell on Jacob’s neck, and the two brothers wept together (Gen. 33:4). We should also remember that Joseph now weeps over Jacob, who is alive, just as Jacob had wept over Joseph, whom he believed to be dead (Gen. 37:35), so that “tears of sorrow...are replaced by tears of joy.”⁵ Second, we read that Jacob “presented himself,” or “was seen/appeared.” This word usually describes a theophany (e.g., Gen. 12:7; 17:1; 26:2, 24; 35:9; cf. Ex. 3:2). Also, we read that Joseph “went up” to meet Israel in Goshen (Gen. 46:29). This word “went up” describes the ascent of God after the conclusion of a theophany (Gen. 17:22; 35:13). This is important, since when Jacob reconciled with Jacob, he had just spent the night wrestling with a theophany, so that he saw God face to face (Gen. 32:30). Then, when Jacob spoke with Esau, he said that seeing Esau’s face was like seeing the face of God (Gen. 33:10). Now, Jacob tells Joseph something very similar: “Now let me die, since I have seen your face and know that you are still alive” (Gen. 46:30). Observing these connections, Kenneth Mathews writes, “This reunion with Joseph bears for Jacob the same divine significance as his reunion with Esau.”⁶

After this affectionate reunion, Joseph gets down to business. He coaches his brothers in order to steer them into the land of Goshen with the blessing of Pharaoh. We should remember that Pharaoh had promised to give Joseph’s brothers the “best of the land” (Gen. 45:18, 20), so there is nothing underhanded about Joseph’s strategizing here.⁷ Indeed, Joseph coaches his brothers to state clearly that they are shepherds, since “every shepherd is an abomination to the Egyptians” (Gen. 46:34). Joseph is not trying to trick Pharaoh into giving them land; rather, Joseph is wanting to make it very clear to Pharaoh that he does not intend to bestow nepotistical, royal appointments to his family now that they have arrived in Egypt.⁸ They have lived as shepherds this far, and they will continue to do so. If Joseph had appointed them all to positions of royalty and privilege in Egypt, it would have been tempting for them to be corrupted by Egypt’s power, and drawn aside to Egypt’s pagan gods (cf. Heb. 11:24–26).⁹ Through this plan, the narrative creates an interesting contrast between Judah and Joseph: “Judah led the brothers to the land of Goshen, but it was Joseph’s wise plan that resulted in their being able to live there.”¹⁰

A Settlement for Abominations (Gen. 47:1–6)

As he discussed with his brothers, Joseph goes in first to Pharaoh, declaring that his entire family had arrived at last, and that they are in the land of Goshen (Gen. 47:1). Joseph takes five of his

⁴ For the textual links noted in this paragraph, see Mathews, *Genesis 11*, 1B:842.

⁵ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 602.

⁶ Mathews, *Genesis 11*, 1B:842.

⁷ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:394.

⁸ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 445.

⁹ “So the Lord often permits us to be despised or rejected by the world, that being liberated and cleansed from its pollution, we may cultivate holiness. Finally, he does not suffer us to be bound by chains to the earth, in order that we may be borne upward to heaven.” (Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:395.)

¹⁰ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 226.

brothers as a delegation before Pharaoh, and, in response to Pharaoh's question about their occupation, the brothers admitted that they were shepherds, as their fathers were (Gen. 47:2–3). In the cultural context, this admission is humiliating, but it will keep the nation of Israel separated from the courts of Egypt.¹¹ In the short term, Goshen will be a refuge for Israel's family from the famine, so that Joseph may provide for their needs there (Gen. 45:10–11). In the longer term, Goshen will be the place separated from the world that God will bless his people, and cause them to be fruitful and multiply into a great nation (Ex. 1:7). In Goshen, God will distinguish them as his people a number of times by keeping Goshen clear of the plagues that come against Egypt (e.g., Ex. 8:22–23; 9:4; 10:23; 11:7).

Those plagues, however, will only come against a later Pharaoh who forgets about Joseph (Ex. 1:8). This Pharaoh knows Joseph very well, and is grateful to Joseph for Joseph's wise handling of the seven years of plenty, and the seven years of famine. Therefore, this Pharaoh is pleased to settle Joseph's brothers in the best of the land in Goshen. Moreover, Pharaoh even asks Joseph to entrust his own royal herds to any worthy shepherds from Israel's household. Just as Pharaoh had set Joseph over all the land of Egypt (Gen. 41:41), so now Pharaoh sets Joseph's brothers over his livestock: "Thus the narrative shows that Joseph's fortune was duplicated in the fortune of his brothers."¹² The brothers' interview with Pharaoh goes even better than Joseph had planned.

The Superior and the Inferior (Gen. 47:7–12)

Last, Joseph brings in Jacob his father to stand before Pharaoh (Gen. 47:7a). Remarkably, Jacob twice blesses Pharaoh, at the beginning of their meeting, and at the end (Gen. 47:7a, 10). In part, this signifies the fulfillment of God's promise that he would bless those who blessed the offspring of Abraham (cf. Gen. 12:3).¹³ More than that, if it is "beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior" (cf. Gen. 14:9; Heb. 7:7),¹⁴ then there seems to be an ironic contrast here between Jacob and Pharaoh. Pharaoh is in the position of power, secure on the throne of his kingdom. In the next section, Pharaoh will take personal possession of all the land of Egypt, which the Egyptians sell in exchange for grain (Gen. 47:13–26). Jacob, on the other hand, is a man who has spent his days in "sojourning" (Gen. 47:9a) wherever he has lived, whether in Canaan, or Paddan-Aram, or, now, in Egypt. While Pharaoh's life is marked by ease, Jacob's days have been "few and evil," and fallen short of the days lived by his fathers during the time of their sojourning (Gen. 47:9b). Even so, it is Jacob who blesses Pharaoh. Notice also that Jacob, unlike his sons, does not speak of himself in the first person ("my"), and not as "your servant."¹⁵ In light of what this contrast between Pharaoh and Jacob, how can we say that Jacob is the superior, and Pharaoh the inferior?

¹¹ "The design of God was this, to keep the sons of Jacob in a degraded position, until he should restore them to the land of Canaan: for the purpose, then, of preserving themselves in unity till the promised deliverance should take place, they did not conceal the fact that they were shepherds." (Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:400.)

¹² Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 226.

¹³ Sailhamer, 226.

¹⁴ Mathews, *Genesis 11*, 1B:846.

¹⁵ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 446.

To start, Victor Hamilton notes that “Jacob is inferior to Pharaoh as regards position, but may be superior to Pharaoh in the matter of age, and at least is well beyond the Egyptian ideal of the 110-year life.”¹⁶ Also, John Sailhamer argues that Jacob’s assessment of his life is a deliberate contrast to the promise that the one who honors his father and mother will “live long and do well upon the land” (Deut. 5:15). Because Jacob gained the blessing by deceiving his father, his days are short and evil, and he dies outside the land.¹⁷

Beyond these two ideas, there seems also to be an echo here of what we read about Esau in Genesis 36. There, we read about the great nation that Esau becomes, with a possession of land, and an extensive genealogy. This is explicitly in contrast to Jacob, who is only a sojourner, and does not yet possess the land of Canaan (Gen. 37:1). The contrast becomes even sharper when we read about the kings who come from Esau, “before any king reigned over the Israelites” (Gen. 36:31). Esau becomes a great earthly nation in the “land of their possession” (Gen. 36:42), while Jacob is nevertheless portrayed as superior. Why? Because Jacob lived by faith in the heavenly promises, while Esau’s treasures were merely of the earth. As John Calvin notes in his commentary on Genesis 47, believers in every age must see our lives as a sojourning in this world, as we await a better, heavenly country that we will receive in exchange.¹⁸ Despite all earthly appearances, Jacob is the superior to Pharaoh because he is the possessor not of earthly blessings, but of the heavenly blessings that God has promised to him.

Discussion Questions

- 1) Why does Judah go ahead of the rest of the family to Goshen (Gen. 46:28)? How does the reunion of Jacob and Joseph echo the earlier reunion between Jacob and Esau? How are those stories different in the nature of each respective separation? Why does Joseph coach his family to acknowledge that they are shepherds, even though “every shepherd is an abomination to the Egyptians” (Gen. 46:34)? Why shouldn’t Joseph take advantage of his position and connections at this time?
- 2) Why do the brothers follow through with the plan to acknowledge that they are shepherds, even though such an admission must have been humiliating? Why do you think they did not try harder to gain some privileged position through their connections to Joseph? What does their willingness to work hard at common, despised labor suggest about their character and values? How are Christians likewise to do our work quietly (2 Thess. 3:12)?
- 3) How does this narrative acknowledge the superiority of Jacob over Pharaoh? How does Jacob possibly qualify as superior over Pharaoh, when Pharaoh owns far more land than Jacob, a sojourner (cf. Gen. 47:13–26)? How does Jacob qualify as superior over Pharaoh, when Jacob’s days have been “few and evil” (Gen. 47:9)? How does the outward superiority of Pharaoh over Jacob compare to the account of Esau in Genesis 36? What do those accounts teach us about Jacob?

¹⁶ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 611.

¹⁷ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 226–227.

¹⁸ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:403–404.

4) Why do we read in the New Testament that we are also sojourners and exiles (1 Pet. 2:11)? What kind of sojourning do we experience, even if we own our own physical real estate in this world? How does God intend us to inform the way we live our lives by this sojourner mindset? How does living as a sojourner keep our minds set on things above, and not on the things below, here on earth (Col. 3:1–2)? Why is this important as we live the Christian life?