

Buried in Canaan (Gen. 47:13–31)

By Jacob D. Gerber

Joseph's interactions with his family were the unbroken focus of Genesis 42:1–47:12. Only now, once Joseph has been reconciled with his family, does the focus of the narrative shift back to Joseph's wise administration over the famine crisis that affects Egypt and Canaan (v. 13). When that crisis is resolved over the next few years, the narrative shifts back once again to Joseph's family (v. 27–31). Joseph's work in the wider world is important, but even more important is God's work to raise up salvation through his people. For this reason, the final acts of Jacob's life have lasting significance at this early moment in Israel's history. Most importantly, Jacob demonstrates the future orientation of his faith in God's promises by making Joseph swear to bury Jacob's body back in the land of Canaan. As the book of Genesis starts coming to a close, this passage reminds us that *God preserves the living and raises the dead*.

Faithful Wisdom (Gen. 47:13–26)

For the fourth time, we read that the famine is severe (Gen. 41:31; 43:1; 47:4; 47:13; cf. Gen. 12:10), but only here and in Pharaoh's original dream do we read that the famine is "very severe."¹ This "very severe" famine causes languishing not only in the land of Egypt, but also in the land of Canaan (v. 13). This note about the ongoing effects of the famine in Canaan confirms the wisdom of Joseph's judgment in bringing his family down from Canaan into Goshen, so that he can provide for them closer to him.

Now, for the first time since Genesis 41, the spotlight of the narrative focuses again on Joseph's wisdom in administration to lead the world through this famine. The first statement about this deals with Joseph's gathering up "all" the money brought in from Egypt and Canaan when he sold grain, in order to bring it into Pharaoh's house (v. 14). Not many people could withstand the temptations that would come with sole access over that quantity of money, but here we see Joseph's unwavering integrity.² The word for "gathered up" is a term that appears elsewhere in the Old Testament to describe gleaning, or picking up scraps of food from a crop (e.g., Lev. 19:9; Judg. 1:7), which vividly conveys the idea that the people are bringing Joseph "every last penny to buy food."³ Additionally, Joseph's taking the money (lit, "silver") is somewhat ironic. At the beginning of the story, Joseph was sold (37:28) into slavery (39:17) for twenty pieces of silver (37:28). Now, at the conclusion, Joseph sells (47:20) the whole land of Egypt into slavery (19, 25) and takes "all the silver in the land" (v. 18).⁴

¹ Mathews, *Genesis 11*, 1B:856.

² Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:407.

³ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 448.

⁴ Sailhamer, 227–228.

Eventually, though, all the money in Egypt and in Canaan is spent, and still the famine trudges on. Through the rest of this passage, the people return to barter something more of theirs in exchange for something of value: money for grain (v. 14), livestock for food (v. 17), and land for seed (v. 23).⁵ By the end of this passage, Joseph has taken possession of all the money, livestock, and land for Pharaoh, so that “the land became Pharaoh’s” (v. 20), with the land of the priests being the only exception (v. 22). Even the people themselves become the servants of Pharaoh (v. 25). How are we to interpret what is happening here?

Some, in reading this passage, have interpreted Joseph’s actions in an unethical light, as though he were exploiting the situation to take possession of everything and everyone. This, however, is not what the text actually suggests. To interpret this passage rightly, we must notice the repeated theme of life and death. The people plead with Joseph not to die (v. 15, 19a), and they praise Joseph for saving their lives (v. 25). The contrast between life and death is brought together explicitly in v. 19: “And give us seed that we may live and not die....” As John Sailhamer points out, life and death has been a recurring theme throughout the Joseph narratives, but up to this point they have dealt with the life and death concerns of Joseph’s family (Gen. 42:2, 18–20; 43:8; 45:5). On this point, Sailhamer writes, “Such repetitions in the surface structure of the narrative suggest a thematic strategy at work. First with his brothers and then with the Egyptians, Joseph’s wisdom is seen as the source of life for everyone in the land.”⁶

Even after taking possession of the land, Joseph is not a cruel taskmaster. Unlike the way the Egyptians will later treat the Israelites (Ex. 1:13–14), the Israelite Joseph treats the Egyptians kindly by letting them keep eighty percent of the crops they raise on Pharaoh’s land, while only taking twenty percent for Pharaoh (v. 24–26).⁷ As noted earlier, the people do not grumble with this arrangement. On the contrary, they are exceedingly thankful: “You have saved our lives; may it please my lord, we will be servants to Pharaoh” (v. 25). It is perhaps difficult for us to understand how anyone could be happy about becoming a slave, but we must understand that this kind of slavery was nothing like the chattel slavery of Africans practiced in the United States. Gordon Wenham gives a helpful analogy: “Ancient slavery at its best was like tenured unemployment, whereas the free man was more like someone who is self-employed. The latter may be freer, but he faces more risks (cf. Exod 21:5–6; Deut 15:12–17).”⁸

This story of Joseph’s wise and gracious administration through this famine, and the resulting blessing shared by the whole world who came into interaction with him, stands in stark contrast to the story that emerges at the beginning of the book of Exodus. After Joseph dies, no Israelite retains Joseph’s role of leadership directly underneath Pharaoh. More than that, the new king who arises does not even remember Joseph and all that Joseph had done for Egypt (Ex. 1:8). The Pharaoh who lived during Joseph’s day was blessed because he blessed Israel, the offspring of Abraham (cf. Gen. 12:3). The later Pharaoh will misinterpret his great wealth as proof of his own glory, forgetting that it was an Israelite who acquired it for him. Then, he will be cursed because he instead treats Israel harshly. As Allen Ross observes, “From the beginning to the end of the Egyptian sojourn, prosperity

⁵ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 618.

⁶ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 227.

⁷ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 618.

⁸ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 449.

and growth came from God's blessing. Those who acknowledged it shared in it."⁹

Fruitful Blessings (Gen. 47:27)

This next section is short, but important. The previous section brought the timeline of a famine to a close, and now the spotlight of the narrative returns to Israel. Joseph had provided for Israel in Goshen during the famine. Then, after the famine is over, Israel gains great possessions in the land. Most importantly, we read that the Israelites "were fruitful and multiplied greatly" (v. 27). We have seen in a number of ways how the Joseph story is meant to bring the overarching story of Genesis to a close, by tying off the loose ends that came unraveled at the beginning of Genesis.¹⁰ At creation, God had commanded Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply (Gen. 1:28).¹¹ Throughout the rest of Genesis, God commanded his people repeatedly to be fruitful and multiply (Gen. 8:17; 9:1, 7; 17:20; 28:3, 35:11), but, as Victor Hamilton observes, this instance is different in an important way: "In Genesis these verbs normally describe a goal. Here they describe a fait accompli."¹² Although God will still cause his people to be increasingly fruitful, and to multiply even more (Ex. 1:7), we are seeing here at the end of Genesis a partial fulfillment of the original mandate and promise.

Future-Oriented Faith (Gen. 47:28–31)

In v. 28, we read that Jacob lived in Egypt another seventeen years, so that he lived to a total of 147 years (cf. Gen. 47:9). In this final section of our passage, Jacob begins to make preparations for his death. These preparations will stretch through the next two chapters, until Joseph's death at the end of Genesis 49. First, Jacob here calls Joseph to him to make his son swear to bury his bones back in Canaan. The whole scene is reminiscent of Genesis 24, where Abraham made his servant put his hand under his thigh to swear that he would not permit Isaac to marry one of the women from the land of Canaan (Gen. 24:2–3). Abraham's action arose from his faith, that God had sworn to give his offspring the land of Canaan, which also meant that he would dispossess the people currently living in the land (cf. Gen. 15:16–21). Jacob's request seeks a different action, but toward the same goal.¹³ Specifically, Jacob wanted to be buried in Canaan as an expression of faith in the promises that God would give his offspring the land of Canaan.¹⁴

Jacob did not take possession of Canaan during his lifetime, but he died in faith, insisting that his bones be buried in Canaan in anticipation of the day in which God would give his offspring the land. John Sailhamer makes an interesting connection between this passage and Ezekiel 37:1–14, where God gives the prophet a vision of raising up dry bones buried in the land to life again.¹⁵ Intriguingly, Sailhamer observes that, immediately after that famous vision of the dry bones coming

⁹ Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 687.

¹⁰ Bruce T. Dahlberg, "On Recognizing the Unity of Genesis," *Theology Digest* 24, no. 4 (1976): 360–67.

¹¹ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 228.

¹² Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 622.

¹³ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 228.

¹⁴ Kidner, *Genesis*, 223.

¹⁵ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 228–29.

to life again, Ezekiel next prophesies about the reunion of Joseph and Judah (Ezek. 37:15–23). In the context of Ezekiel, Joseph and Judah are representatives of the northern nation of Israel, and the southern nation of Judah, respectively; however, Joseph and Judah are also two key figures at some tension throughout these Joseph narratives. Just as that tension is reconciled in Genesis, so God foretells the day when the division of the twelve tribes of Israel will be healed through a Davidic shepherd king who will make an everlasting covenant of peace with his people (Ezek. 37:24–28).

When Joseph agrees to Jacob's request, we read that "Israel bowed himself upon the head of his bed" (v. 31). It is difficult to know precisely what this means, but, as Ross points out, "Many commentators conclude that this was a reverent act of thanksgiving by the patriarch."¹⁶ Jacob can die in peace, knowing that his bones will be buried in the land that God promised to give to his offspring forever. This will be Jacob's final act of faith, carried out after his death.

Discussion Questions

- 1) What do you make of Joseph's administration during the famine in Egypt (v. 13–26)? Does the text suggest that Joseph handles the situation wisely and graciously, or does he unethically exploit the poverty and hunger of the people? How does Joseph provide for the needs of the people? How does this story frame our understanding of the vast wealth and resources of the Pharaoh we encounter in Exodus, who lifts himself up against Israel and Israel's God?
- 2) Study the various places in Genesis where God either commands or promises for his people to be fruitful and multiply (Gen. 8:17; 9:1, 7; 17:20; 28:3, 35:11). Why does God consider this goal so important in his purposes for creation and redemption? Why is it so important to read that Israel *is* fruitful, and that they *do* multiply here at the end of Genesis (v. 27)? How do we interpret this fulfillment in light of later fruitfulness and multiplication (e.g., Ex. 1:7)?
- 3) Why should Jacob care where he is buried when he dies? How does Jacob's insistence that Joseph bury him in Canaan remind us of Genesis 24, where Abraham made his servant swear not to allow Isaac to marry a woman from the land? How are those two death-bed wishes of the patriarchs related? What does this teach us about Jacob's faith in God's faithfulness to keep the promises he made to his people?
- 4) What promises do we have beyond death? In this life, how do we take seriously those future promises of what God will do after we die? In what ways does Christianity teach us to live in view of the brevity of this life, the certainty of our deaths, and the promise of eternity with Christ? How does Christianity teach us to live well, so that we may die well? What is the modern equivalent of Jacob's request for Joseph to bury him in Canaan?

¹⁶ Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 692.