



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Class Notes

Joseph and the Famine / Arrangements for Jacob

Genesis 47.13–31

Introduction: Section Structure

1. We are in the ninth of the ten episodes of Joseph's story: *Last years of famine relief, Egypt becomes more desperate (47.13–31)* (Longacre 2003, 471–473; review the list [here](#)).
 - a. “In episode 9 (Gen 47:13–31), the last years of Joseph's famine-relief program are pictured as a rising crescendo of desperation on the part of the Egyptian populace who, out of money and cattle, finally sell themselves as serfs to Pharaoh to obtain grain” (Longacre 2003, 473).
 - b. Our text completes the unit in chapters 46–47, following the relocation/genealogy of Jacob's family to Goshen in Egypt (46.1–47.12) (see the introduction to “Jacob's Family Settles in Egypt,” [here](#)).
2. A shift occurs from a focus on the family to famine conditions for the Egyptians, but “verses 13–26 are not an ‘appendage,’ having nothing to do with Jacob's family” (Mathews 2005, loc 22,518). Structurally, there is an emphasis on the land and the Egyptians in vv. 13 and 26 that marks off that section, and another reference to the land and Israel in v. 27 that indicates the shift to a new emphasis.

Joseph Wisely Administers the Famine (47.13–26)

3. The sections of this unit move from problem (severe famine, v. 13) to resolution (law concerning the land, v. 26) (breakdown and headings of the following adapted from Matthews 2005, loc 22,562).

Selling grain for silver (vv. 13–14)

4. The famine was so severe that the land is described as “languishing” or “wasting away” (NET) (v. 13). From the verb לָאָה, *la'ah*, drooping, being worn out (Harris 2019, 47.13 n. 20).
5. Joseph collects all the money that could be “found;” the sense is a fervent rummaging for money, “bringing every last penny” (Mathews 2005, loc 22,607).

Exchanging grain for livestock (vv. 15–17)

6. It was unlikely that the Egyptians turned over their livestock to Joseph, but rather bound them as security. So the animals became government property, but were used by the people (Willis 1979, 37).

Obtaining the land and enslaving the people (vv. 18–22)

7. Summary.
 - a. All that was left the next year were the people's bodies and land; so they sold their land and became servants [slaves] in exchange for seed (vv. 18–21).

- b. The only exception was the land of the priests who received their food from Pharaoh and so did not have to surrender their land (v. 22).
8. There is a policy shift from privately owned property to centralized ownership of property worked by tenant farmers (v. 19) (Walton 2009, 134).
- a. The priests' situation is exceptional: Egyptian monument inscriptions show they had large estates; Pharaohs were known to make large donations to the temples (Willis 1979, 438; Walton 2009, 135).
9. The significance of the two years referenced in vv. 17, 18 is uncertain, but the severity of conditions and seeding references (vv. 19, 23) suggest they are more likely the final years of the famine than the first two (Willis 1979, 437; Mathews 2005, loc 22,630).
10. Because of modern sensibilities, the idea of the Egyptian people becoming "slaves" (NET; "servants" in ESV; עֲבָד, *'ābad*; cf. Exod 6.5; 9.20; Lev 25.42, 44; Deut 6.21; etc. for similar uses of the word) is off-putting for some modern readers.
- a. Slavery in the OT period (as well as the New) was very different from the harsh exploitation of the Atlantic chattel slave trade of 17th-19th century British and American heritage (though ancient captured peoples who were enslaved faced similar circumstances). At its best, OT slavery with a benevolent employer meant a job for life (Wenham 1994, 88; Mathews 2005, loc 22,471).
- b. Furthermore, in antiquity, debtor slavery "was the primary way of dealing with the poor and destitute. If the people became slaves of Pharaoh, it was Pharaoh's responsibility to feed them and care for them. It was the best way for them to survive the famine" (Harris 2019, 47.19 n. 30).
- c. We gain insight from Leviticus 25.14–43 which shows that it was regarded as an act of charity to buy the land of the destitute and take them as one's employees ("slaves"). In fact, some regarded such slavery as preferable to freedom (self-employment) and some slaves refused their freedom when it was offered (cf. Exod 21.5–6; Deut 15.16–17) (Wenham 1994, 88).
11. Therefore, Joseph is not a brutal taskmaster (cf. Pharaoh in Exod 1), but a conscientious overseer.
- a. Note v. 17 NIV, NET: "he brought them through" (piel form of נָהַל *nāhal*: "guide, bring along, lead; to move along"; Kohlenberger and Mounce 2012, ¶ 11,348), "a term that can indicate a gentle leading of the weak to a place of respite (e.g., 33: 14; Ps 23: 2; Isa 40: 11; 51: 18)" (Mathews 2005, 22,624).
- b. That's the sentiment we see expressed by the Egyptians in 47.25.
12. The above context shows the correctness of the translation of v. 21 in ESV (NIV, NET, NASB 2020).
- a. The ESV footnote has the alternate: "he removed them to the cities" (cf. KJV, ASV, NASB 1995).
- b. The Masoretic Text (MT) has the ESV footnote reading: הָעֲבִיר אֹתוֹ לְעָרִים (*he'ebhir 'otho le'arim*); other ancient texts and commentaries have the same reading.
- c. The Samaritan Pentateuch (SP), followed by the Septuagint (LXX), and (more loosely) the Vulgate, reads: הָעֲבִיד אֹתוֹ לְעֲבָדִים (*he'ebhidh 'otho la'abhadhim*): "he made slaves of them."
- d. In light of the allusions to slavery in vv. 19, 23, and 25, it makes more sense contextually to conclude the SP has the correct reading (Willis 1979, 437–438).¹

Initiating a tenant arrangement (vv. 23–26)

13. Joseph's announcement of possession and provision in v. 23 echoes the people's request in v. 19.
14. If we are correct that the events described in this text are from the last two years of the famine (see

¹ Mathews agrees that the reading accepted by the ESV, et. al., makes sense, but concludes that "since the text addresses the usage of the land in vv. 20, 22, it is also sensible for the passage to tell what became of the population inhabiting the newly acquired parcels (MT)" (Mathews 2025, loc 22,657)

above), then it appears that in the seventh year the Egyptians ask for (v. 19) and receive (v. 23) “seed” to be sown in the following years (Willis 1979, 437).

15. Future harvests would be taxed at a rate of 20% (vv. 24–26). In view of Joseph’s pre-famine advice to Pharaoh to store up 20% (cf. 41.34), the stores that sustained the people through the famine, it would be advisable to prepare for similar shortages in the future (Willis 1979, 438).²
16. A 20% tax means they were permitted to keep 80%, a generous amount that enabled them to do more than merely survive the economically hard times.
 - a. Compare this to Mathews’s citation of Nahum Sarna (JPH Torah Commentary, *Genesis*, 322) who comments that under Hammurabi (reigned ca. 1792–1750 BC), the tenured farmer paid two-thirds to one-half of the produce after deducting expenses; interest rates on money advanced was commonly one-fifth and on loans for crops it was one-third (Mathews 2005, loc 22765 n. 508).
 - b. Later, during the time of the Second Temple, *1 Maccabees* 10.29–30 speaks of the Jews being exempted from payment of one-third of the grain and half of the fruit of the trees.

Israel, in Egypt, Arranges Return to Canaan (47.27–31)

17. This short section again reports the relocation in Egypt, summarizes Jacob’s sojourn and death, and tells of Joseph’s oath to take him back to Canaan (a request showing hope in the promise).

Israel settles, lives to age 147 (vv. 27–28)

18. From verses 27–28, we learn Jacob lived seventeen more years and the family grew.
19. Verse 28 presents us with a matter of literary style that should be noted, effectively announcing Jacob’s death at age 147. This does not mark the end of his participation in the events, however, as other events in his life are yet to be related (47.29–49.32) (Willis 1979, 439).³

Joseph’s oath to return Israel to Canaan (vv. 29–31)

20. In anticipation of his death, Jacob imposes an oath on Joseph, who swears he will bury his father in Canaan; note again that, despite being in Egypt, Jacob is looking forward to the nation’s future in Canaan.
21. The oath formula mimics Abraham and his servant who was sent to find a wife for Isaac (Gen 24).
 - a. Its precise significance is unknown, though the intimacy of the action suggests that serious consequences are in view if the oath is not honored.
 - b. The formula “swear to me” (v. 31) is common in Genesis and elsewhere (cf. Gen 21.23–24; 24.9; 25.33; 31.53; 1 Sam 24.21–22).⁴
22. The last part of verse 31 is another text with alternate readings; two issues are involved.
 - a. ESV text: “Then Israel bowed himself upon the head of his bed.”
 - b. The ESV note references the LXX’s rendering, represented in the NIV: “and Israel worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff.”

² Willis notes other famines mentioned in Canaan and Egypt in Gen 12.10; 26.1; Ruth 1.1; 2 Sam 21.1; 1 Kings 18.2; 2 Kings 4.38; 7.4; 8.1; 25.3; Neh 5.3. Also, the prophets refer to famines as divine punishment on Israel or Judah for their sin (cf. Isa 51.19; Jer 11.22; 14.12, 13, 15; 16, 18; 15.2; 16.4; 18.21; etc. Ezek 5.12, 16, 17; 7.15; 12.16; etc.) (Willis 1979, 438).

³ Note similar advance summaries in Judges 2.11–23 where the judges period is summarized before several of its events are related; and 2 Samuel 5.14 which lists the name of Solomon among David’s sons before his birth is related in 12.24–25. This happens several times in OT literature.

⁴ For a brief summary of “hand under the thigh” oath formula, see Willis 1979, 302–303. For a more elaborate discussion, see R. David Freedman. “Put Your Hand Under My Thigh”—The Patriarchal Oath,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 2.2 (1976): 3–4.

23. The first issue involves the meaning of the word translated “bow” or “worship” (NIV).
- The word is a form of הָוָה (*hāwāh*), “to bow down low (in worship); prostrate oneself; pay one honor, homage. → *bow down; worship*” (Kohlenberger and Mounce 2012, ¶ 5215).
 - “The Hebrew verb normally means ‘bow down,’ especially in worship or prayer. Here it might simply mean ‘bend low,’ perhaps from weakness or approaching death. The narrative is ambiguous at this point and remains open to all these interpretations” (Harris 2019, 47.31 n. 53).⁵
 - The question is:
 - Does bowing at the head of his bed mean that Jacob was thanking/praising God and, in order to assume a position of reverence in his feeble agedness, had to support himself on the head of the bed?
 - Or is he showing respect to Joseph as a ruler and the one granting his request? Perhaps a fulfillment of Joseph’s dream (Gen 37.9–10)?
24. The second issue is whether he is bowing/leaning on his bed (ESV) or staff (NIV, ESV note).
- “The MT [Masoretic Text] reads מִטָּה (*mittah*, “bed, couch”). The LXX reads the word as מַטֵּה (*matteh*, “staff, rod”) and interprets this to mean that Jacob bowed down in worship while leaning on the top of his staff. The LXX reading was used in turn by the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews (Heb 11:21)” (Harris 2019, 47.31 n. 54).
 - Compare the LXX and Greek text of Hebrews.
 - LXX Gen 47.31 – εἶπεν δέ Ἰωσοῦν μοι. καὶ ὁμοσεν αὐτῷ· καὶ προσεκύνησεν Ἰσραὴλ ἐπὶ τὸ ἄκρον τῆς ῥάβδου αὐτοῦ.
 - Heb 11.21 – Πίστει Ἰακώβ ἀποθνήσκων ἕκαστον τῶν υἱῶν Ἰωσήφ εὐλόγησεν, καὶ προσεκύνησεν ἐπὶ τὸ ἄκρον τῆς ῥάβδου αὐτοῦ.
 - Heb 11.21 ESV – By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship **over the head of his staff**.
 - Of interest is that the LXX uses a different word in Gen 48.2 where Jacob is said to have “sat up in his bed” (κλίνη, *klinē*; the Hebrew word is the same as in 47.31).
25. Willis’s conclusion is best: we cannot be sure of the reading of the Hebrew text (Willis 1979, 440).
- But neither choice affects the basic meaning of the text or any important Bible doctrine.
 - It’s another example in chapter 47 of the principle expressed in Deuteronomy 29.29 – “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.”

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⁵ Mathews adds that “bowing” has the sense of “resting on, leaning on” (Mathews 2005, loc 22,728).

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