

Study: The Joseph Story

Text: Genesis 47:13–31 Joseph’s Administration of Egypt¹

I. Joseph Procures Land for Pharaoh (47:13–26)

A. Joseph Sells Food (47:13–14)

1. This verse (47:13) sets the context for the next scene in the Joseph story. It summarizes the situation, the reason for the situation, and the result of that situation.

a. What is the situation?

b. Why is this the case? Which word indicates that a reason/explanation is being given?

c. What is the result of this situation? Where is this result experienced?

2. In light of this dreadful situation, Joseph now acts.

a. What verb is used at the beginning of v. 14 for Joseph’s action?

(1) What is the object of this verb?

(2) Where does this object exist?

b. Interpretation sidenote: It is interesting that in v. 14 the term “gathered up” (Heb. *lqt*) is used frequently in the OT for gathering/gleaning at harvest time (as well as gathering manna).

(1) Prominent food-gathering uses of Heb. *lqt* in OT (37 total occurrences): look up a handful of these passages to see this verb in action.

Crops: Ruth 2:2, 3, 7, 8, 15 (2x), 16, 17 (2x), 18, 19, 23; Isa 17:5; Lev 19:9, 10; 23:22

Manna: Exod 16:4, 5, 16, 17, 18, 21, 22, 26, 27; Num 11:8

¹ The outline of the passage we are following basically follows the outline provided in K. A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, vol. 1B, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2005), 82.

(2) In an artful expression, immediately in the context of explaining that there is “no food,” that the famine is severe, and that the land of Egypt and Canaan are languishing, the writer points out that Joseph is engaged in gleaning/gathering! Not a gleaning of crops—there are none to gather. Instead, having collected wisely for 7 years, he now gathers what can be collected: *money* (silver) for grain!

(3) Where does this gathered/gleaned silver go when Joseph collects it?

(4) How is this a vindication Pharaoh’s language and choice of Joseph in Gen 41:38-41?

B. Joseph Barters for Livestock (47:15–17)

1. Where has all the money run out, acc. to v. 15?

a. Even though two geographical locations are mentioned in this verse, people from only one location now take center stage. Which group?

b. What do they ask Joseph for?

c. What two things is their plea based on?

2. Which type of material possessions does Joseph propose they sell (v. 16)? What will he give in exchange?

3. Acc. to v. 17, what 4 kinds of livestock do they barter with Joseph for grain?

4. How long does this arrangement last?

C. Joseph Obtains Property and Slaves (47:18–22)

1. As the situation reaches its direst, the Egyptians approach Joseph to barter yet again in v. 18.

- a. What two things can they no longer hide from Joseph?
- b. What two things remain for them to barter with?

2. Acc. to v. 19a, what two things do they fear will “die”?

- a. What do they propose that Joseph should do with those two things (v. 19b)? What would it result in?
- b. What specific materials do they ask for in v. 19c? How do they believe receiving this will answer the problem of death to themselves and their lands?

3. As a result of the arrangement, who obtains control of the land and the people (v. 20)?

4. What is the people’s status, acc. to v. 21? How widespread is this situation?

5. Who form an exception to this arrangement (v. 22)? Why?

D. Joseph Taxes the People (47:23–26)

1. Acc. to v. 23, what does Joseph now provide for the people? What are they to do with it?
2. Instructions are given for how to handle harvest time in v. 24.
 - a. What percentage is to go to Pharaoh? What percentage do the people retain?

b. What is their percentage to be used as seed for?

c. For what groups is their percentage to be used as food?

3. Discussion: As Americans who have experienced unprecedeted wealth compared to the subsistence living of the rest of the globe (or compared to humanity in history), how would we personally feel placing ourselves in this kind of economic situation?

4. How do the Egyptians feel about this arrangement (v. 25)? Why do you think they feel this way? Do they enter into this agreement voluntarily? Do they receive any benefits from this arrangement?

5. Many find Joseph's actions unethical because it contradicts our modern sensitivities. Here is what Ken Mathews says about this arrangement:

By obtaining the people and their lands, Joseph in the name of Pharaoh establishes a tenant relationship, in which they can farm the land for sustenance (v. 23). Joseph's declaration of possession and provision in v. 23 echoes the requests of the people themselves in v. 19. The passage portrays Joseph as a compliant partner in assisting the destitute, not an oppressive schemer. . . . The state provides the "seed" (v. 23) and receives a portion of the income (v. 24). . . . The amount of one-fifth (cf. 41:34) is another similarity to the Hebrew practice pertaining to the laws of restitution and redemption when a fifth of the value was added to the total worth (e.g., Lev 5:16, 24; 27:13–31). In this case, however, the fifth is a royal tax (cf. 41:34–37; 2 Kgs 23:35; Amos 7:1; Neh 5:4), not a cultic requirement. That the people are permitted to keep four-fifths shows the crown's generosity, enabling them to do more than survive the economically hard time (v. 24). The misappropriation of taxes was a constant threat to the general public, which typically led to oppression of the underclass (e.g., 1 Kgs 4:7–28; 12:1–24; Amos 5:11). That the people consider Joseph a savior ("you have saved our lives") should mitigate our modern sensitivity to Joseph's action (v. 25). The Egyptians gladly submit to Joseph's plan, which accomplishes the bond service that they themselves initially propose (v. 19).²

² K. A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, vol. 1B, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2005), 859–860.

II. Joseph Promises Jacob (47:27–31)

All the while that the Egyptians face unprecedented lack, we see that two groups of people are ultimately unaffected: the Egyptian priests (favored by Pharaoh), and the Hebrews (favored by Yahweh!).

A. Israel Resides in Egypt (47:27–28)

1. We learn three important things about Israel's fortunes during this time of severe famine in v. 27.

a. Where are they settled (v. 27a)?

b. What are they *doing* in the land (v. 27b)?

How is this verse related to God's promise to Abram in Gen 15:12–14 (esp. v. 14)?

c. What is happening to their physical numbers in the land (v. 27c)?

(1) The language of fruitfulness echoes the blessings pronounced by God and others elsewhere. Look up these passages and identify the central figures who are addressed with this form of blessing:

Gen 1:28

Gen 9:1

Gen 12:1–2; 13:6; 15:5; 17:4, 6; 22:17

Gen 26:4 (see v.1 for context)

Gen 28:3 (see v. 1 for context), 13–14; 35:11; 46:3

(2) The language of fruitfulness also foreshadows the language of Exod 1:7. What does Moses say there about the Israelites in Egypt?

2. We also learn something about Jacob in v. 28. How many years does he live in Egypt? How many years total does he live?

B. Joseph Swears to Return Jacob (47:29–31)

1. Which son does Jacob call to himself as he approaches his death (v. 29)?

a. Where is Joseph told to put his hand? What is he to promise not to do?

b. If Joseph will keep this promise, what does Jacob consider Joseph to be doing to/for him?³

2. Where does Jacob instead desire to be buried (v. 30)? Why? How does Joseph respond?

3. In v. 31 the stakes are raised. This promise is now not just a promise but a what?

4. What does this desire on Jacob's part tell you about his faith in Yahweh?

³ Comment on v.29: The language here of placing a hand under one's thigh and making one promise to do something echoes the Abrahamic adjuration of his oldest servant (prob. Eliezer) when he was sent to find a bride for Isaac back in the land of Haran (Gen 24:2). Also, Eliezer while on this mission asks Laban's family if they will "deal kindly and truly" and send him away with Rebekah (Gen 24:49). Other similarities: these promises are elevated to the swearing of an oath (Gen 24:3, 9, 37; Gen 47:31); both involve prohibitions relating to foreign lands compared to the promised land: "don't take my son [Isaac] back to my country" (Gen 24:5-6, 8) and "don't bury me in Egypt" (Gen 47:29-30).