

THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM – PART IX - SECTION II

THE PEOPLE OF GOD MOVE INTO EGYPT

I. Chapter 46 describes the family of Jacob as it departs to Egypt in a fashion that brings out some subtle ambiguities about the journey.

A. Israel begins his journey to Egypt by stopping at Beer-sheba, the site of several holy and historical events, including: the agreement between Abraham and Abimelech and later Isaac and Abimelech that set up good relations between the people of God and the secular world; Abraham's sojourn after the "sacrifice" of Isaac; the appearance of God to Isaac; and the appearance of God to Jacob as he journeyed to the land of Laban. See Gen. 21:32, 22:19, 26:23-33, 28:10.

1. Jacob probably wanted some assurance and guidance about how to proceed in the midst of such opportunity (insofar as he would have Joseph back and be in the privileged class) and risk (insofar as he would be in a foreign land for an extended time.)

2. God appears to Israel, calling him by his original name Jacob, which may imply a more personal communication to the one whom God had first spoken.

3. Jacob responds, "Here, I am" as Abraham did to the call to sacrifice Isaac and Moses will to God at the burning bush. It is a sign of readiness to do God's will.

4. God assures Jacob that he should go down to Egypt, for he will become a great nation. Then God says that he will bring Jacob back after Joseph has closed his eyes, that is, after he has died. The obvious implication is that Jacob's family will return one day. It is noteworthy that God identifies the family with Jacob. In Jewish thought the family and the individual were often associated with each other. Early on in Jewish thought, there was only the haziest notion of an afterlife; but if the family continued the individual continued in it.

B. Israel then continues the journey, taking his sons and everything they have. However, Israel the patriarch does not completely commit himself.

1. Israel's sons take everything that they have, but it is not clear that Israel does. He may well be leaving his own wealth

behind so that he has an escape.

2. They use the transportation that Pharaoh provides, indicating a certain reliance on him that will become dangerous later on.

C. The text then lists the members of Israel's family, divided up according to the sons. It is a first indication of the division of Israel into twelve tribes.

1. The enumerations have a couple of ambiguities.

- First, the six sons of Israel and Leah and their children number 32 and two dead (Er and Onan, the first sons of Judah); and yet the text says that there are 33 of them. It may be that Er and Onan (both of whom offended God) are being counted as one, or perhaps more likely Onan is being cut out altogether.

- On a related point, the list of the descendants of Joseph and Benjamin, the beloved ones has thirteen names, but the text says that there are fourteen descendants in the list. The solution would be that Joseph Egyptian wife is being counted.

2. At the end, the list states that there were 66 people whom Israel brought into Egypt. It then gives the number 70, which includes Israel himself, Joseph and his sons. Israel is standing somewhat apart, still the leader of his people as Joseph is the leader of Egypt. One sees, even between this father and son who were to be reunited a certain tension in leadership.

3. It is noteworthy that Benjamin, the least of the brothers has the most children, nine. It would be from his line that St. Paul would descend. It is often the seemingly least people that God works with the most.

D. When the family arrives in Egypt, Israel is hopeful but still cautious.

1. Instead of going to meet Pharaoh in the mainland of Egypt, he sends Judah, the leader of his sons, ahead to bring

Joseph to him in Goshen.

2. Joseph does come to Israel and is overjoyed at the meeting. Israel certainly rejoices as well, saying that he can now die in peace, similar to the words used by Simeon when he saw the child Jesus. See Luke 2:29-32. However, in that case, the joy was for salvation now available to all people.

3. Even in this moment of joy, however, Jacob is a bit reserved. He refers, not to "my son" as before, but only by name to Joseph. Joseph is now a bit more remote from him.

E. Joseph is also careful in his planning. He goes out of his way to tell his brothers that they are all shepherds and have ever been so that they can remain apart from the Egyptians.

1. Joseph makes it clear that the Egyptians despise shepherds. The reason is not clear, although there has ever been some tension between nomadic shepherds and more fixed farmers, as was the case between Cain and Abel. It may be related to the fact that the Egyptians worshipped many gods in animal form, and thus looked down on the eating or sacrifice of animals. Later, Moses would make it clear that Israel's animal sacrifices would be abominable to the Egyptians. See Ex. 8:22-23.

2. Part of the idea may be simple caution. Joseph does not want there to be a clash between the Egyptians and his family. But there may also be a desire to keep his people separate from the Egyptians so that they will not be subsumed by Egyptian culture.

3. This land of Goshen was to the northeast of the rest of Egyptian civilization and was probably the outskirts of Egyptian civilization, making it easier to settle the family there.

II. Chapter 47 begins with the meetings between Joseph and Pharaoh and then between Jacob and Pharaoh. The negotiations are friendly, but there is some tension in the background.

A. First Joseph goes to Pharaoh with five of his brothers.

1. Joseph may have selected the five that would be most likely to impress Pharaoh, or perhaps least likely to say anything foolish. Joseph is avoiding a total commitment to this meeting.
2. Pharaoh asks them their profession. It is ever a concern of governments that immigrants be productive and contribute to society.
3. The brothers are very respectful and describe themselves as shepherds, as Joseph had instructed. Pharaoh seems almost pleased at this answer, despite the fact that the Egyptians despise shepherds.
 - a. Some have proposed that Pharaoh may have been a foreigner, as the Greek Hyksos dynasty was when it dominated Egypt in the 17th century (about 1670-1570) B.C.
 - b. Another likely possibility is that Pharaoh knew the economic desirability of herdsman, and so was pleased to find people who would do it. For he even offers to have members of Joseph's family tend his own flocks. Immigrants are often welcomed to do work that needs to be done, but that the native population despises.

B. Jacob and Pharaoh then meet. The meeting is friendly, but Jacob does insist on his independence.

1. When Jacob first comes, Pharaoh's first question is his age. Jacob seems like the venerable old man, and Pharaoh is impressed, or possibly a bit nervous, about his status, for Egyptians highly valued age and tradition.
2. Jacob says that he has been a wayfarer for 130 years.
 - When they come to Egypt, Joseph is about 40, making Jacob about 94. It is possible that this meeting occurred much later. It could also be that Jacob is including the time since Isaac left Abraham at about the age of 18 or 20, after the proposed sacrifice on Mount Moriah.

- In any case, Jacob not only refers to his years, but indicates that his fathers lived longer and harder lives,

indicating a durable people and implying that they are from a heroic land. At one level, Jacob is respecting his ancestors, especially Abraham, who lived 175 years, and Isaac who live for 180 years. At another level, he is probably trying to impress Pharaoh. Jacob does not have much physical power, but does have the venerable mystery behind him.

4. In addition, Jacob, while pays respects to Pharaoh, does not refer to himself as a servant of Pharaoh as lord. He is asserting a certain equality. In addition, Jacob blesses Pharaoh at the end. It is true that people do sometimes give blessings to kings in the sense of praise and good wishes. See, e.g., 2 Sam. 16:16, 1 Kings 1:31. However, this blessing seems to be more along the lines of a mysterious man of God giving blessings to an earthly conqueror, as Melchizedek did for Abraham. In this sense, it is the superior who gives the blessing. See Heb. 7:7.
 5. In addition, Joseph brings Jacob into Pharaoh's presence, but Jacob leaves alone. There is both a partnership but also a distance between the earthly leadership of Joseph and the religious patriarchy of Jacob. The tension is present throughout history.
 6. Pharaoh does not seem to mind Jacob's independence. At this point, there is a favorable alliance between the foreign religion and the state. It may even be that Pharaoh sensed the divine working in Jacob as He had in Joseph.
- C. Joseph then provides for his family in the best of the land. At one level, this arrangement is favorable. However, any Jew reading this text after the exile would know of the slavery that his people would suffer at the hands of the same government. The same power that is a benefactor can turn against one.

III. The text then turns to the acquisition of complete power for Pharaoh through Joseph's administration. The text is

descriptive, not normative, and it is not clear whether the author approves or disapproves of the change.

A. At one level, the narrative is straightforward. Pharaoh has vast quantities of surplus food, and the people need it during the famine. Joseph sells it to them on behalf of Pharaoh, first for money, then for animals (the next form of wealth) and then for the land and the people themselves. At the end of the seven years, Pharaoh has acquired complete feudal like power.

- The text refers to the slavery of the people, but the situation is probably more like serfdom. For if the people were completely enslaved, there would be no point in Joseph ordering them to give a fifth of their income to Pharaoh.

- The Egyptian priests managed to escape the bondage, probably because of their mystique and their cleverness. The Egyptian religion would continue, and Joseph could not stop it with his political power. As with the power of Jacob, and later of Judah, religious power is more subtle, but more enduring than political power, represented by Joseph.

B. In describing the rise of power of the Pharaoh, the text is describing an example of the historical phenomenon of the rise of complete governmental power in an era (about the eighteenth century B.C.) during which the great empires, and great imperial government, was growing in Egypt, Babylon, Syria, and for that matter, even Crete. These events are probably taking place a little after 1800 B.C. Hammurabi's Code was written in 1760 B.C. The great palace of Minoan Crete was built in 1720 B.C.

- It is noteworthy that the text presents a more decentralized government as the beginning state and a more feudal structure rising in a few years from the crisis.

C. The text does not say whether this rise of large government is a good or bad thing, or simply inevitable in such a situation. See Leon Kaas, The Beginning of Wisdom 631-633.

1. On the one hand, it works to the family of Jacob's favor temporarily. On the other hand, the government would eventually enslave them. And, when the country of Israel was established, the future king was not supposed to build up a large treasury or army, or make foreign alliances. See Duet. 17:14-20.

2. On the one hand, the people praise Joseph for saving them. On the other hand, they do not seem to have been very intelligent to begin with. It is a temptation to turn to strong powers to deal with crises, but there can be a danger in doing so, as God warns the Israelites when they demand a king "like other nations." See 1 Sam. 8:10-22

3. Origin said that, as the Egyptians became slaves because they did not know the word of God that guided Joseph, so all carnal people will become slaves of desire. See Origin, Homilies on Genesis 6:2-3.

IV. The people of God then settle in Goshen and prosper. However, Jacob always remembers his home land and insists that Joseph have him buried in Bethel.

A. The text indicates a people that is expanding both in population and in wealth. One can imagine that the native Egyptians were already getting a jealous of these new and favored people. Even assuming that the foreign Hyksos dynasty was not yet ruling over Egypt, when it later did, the Hebrews would be associated with them. And when that dynasty was overthrown, it would make the resentment against the Hebrews take the form of oppression.

B. Jacob, seeing his people prosper, but perhaps worried about them becoming too acclimated to this land not their own, makes a demand of Joseph, i.e. that he be buried in the sacred town of Bethel.

1. He turns to Joseph, both because Joseph can most easily arrange the burial, and to remind this, his most beloved son, of his heritage.

2. As with Abraham's burial of a grave for Sarah, this act of burial will ground the people in the Promised Land. And Jacob will be buried alongside Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah and Rachel. That grave would, for 400 years preserve the Chosen People's claim on the land while they resided in Egypt. Joseph's purchase of land would eventually be reversed, but the ownership of a religious heritage endures.