

## Chapter 12: A Nation Going Down to Egypt

*Genesis 45:16–46:27*

Now that Joseph has revealed his identity, the narrative shifts in a major way through the end of Genesis. The drama and tension of Joseph’s conflict with his brothers has been resolved, and now reconciliation can take place. Still, there is more going on in this section of the Bible than a simple family reunion. As we see Joseph’s brothers bring their father, Jacob, back to Egypt, along with his entire household, we are seeing the migration of a nation. At this point, the nation is still small. Nevertheless, this passage is portraying the nation for what it is: a new humanity through which God will restore the corrupted humanity. Thus, Jacob is a new Adam, and, through Israel, *God is creating a new humanity*.

### **The Prerequisite: Faith in the Resurrection (Gen. 45:16–28)**

When Pharaoh hears the report that Joseph’s brothers have come, he is pleased with the news (Gen. 45:16). Pharaoh tells Joseph to instruct his brothers to load their beasts in order to return to the land of Canaan (Gen. 45:17). When they have returned, they should take their father and their households, and return to Egypt (Gen. 45:18a). This is the same instruction that Joseph had given his brothers (Gen. 45:9–13), and Pharaoh gives his own blessing to the plan. Furthermore, just as Joseph planned to settle his family in Goshen, so Pharaoh insists twice that Joseph’s family should have the “best” (טוב; *tób*) of the land (Gen. 45:18, 20). Pharaoh does this out of his gratitude to Joseph and Joseph’s God.<sup>1</sup> In blessing the offspring of Abraham (i.e., Joseph’s family), he is entering into the promises that God made to Abraham so many years earlier: “I will bless those who bless you...and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:3).

There is another important reason to describe this as the “best” land, since it echoes the description of God’s original creation: “very good” (טוב מאד; *tób mē’ōd*).<sup>2</sup> As we will see, this passage is explicitly casting Israel as a new Adam (i.e., a new humanity), and part of the way that this passage portrays this is by the way in which they will be settled into the “best” land. This same kind of idea will reappear in Deuteronomy 30:5, when the Lord promises to “do good” (יטב; *yatab*) to Israel by bringing them into the promised land.<sup>3</sup> God’s redemptive purposes aim at nothing less than creating a new humanity to redeem the original humanity that was corrupted by the fall into sin.

As the brothers prepare to return to Canaan to bring their father back down to Egypt, Joseph first gives each of them a change of clothes, but five changes of clothes and three hundred shekels of silver to Benjamin (Gen. 45:22). This is a pointed gesture, since Joseph’s clothing had been the

---

<sup>1</sup> Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 678–79.

<sup>2</sup> Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 223.

<sup>3</sup> Sailhamer, 223.

symbol of their father’s special affection, leading them to hate Joseph (Gen. 37:3–4).<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the only previous place that silver and clothing appeared together was in Genesis 37, when the brothers stripped Joseph of his special robe and sold him for twenty shekels of silver (Gen. 37:23, 28).<sup>5</sup> Joseph is reversing his brothers’ wicked actions in order to communicate his forgiveness not only by his words, but by his deeds.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, before they return, Joseph warns them not to quarrel on the way (Gen. 45:24). Joseph may have had two concerns to lead him to say this. First, he may have worried that, now that they must confess their crime to Jacob, they may devolve into fighting and accusing one another in such a way that would derail the return trip back to Egypt (cf. Gen. 42:22).<sup>7</sup> Second, Joseph may have had a last pang of concern for Benjamin, since the brothers could have perhaps continued the cover-up of what they had done to Joseph by murdering Benjamin.<sup>8</sup> Benjamin is the only eyewitness to Joseph who was not involved in the original evil against Joseph.

Unsurprisingly, when the brothers tell Jacob that Joseph is still alive, and that he has become ruler over all the land of Egypt, Jacob struggles to believe the news (Gen. 45:26). Where seeing the cloak robe of Joseph led Jacob to believe that his son was dead, Jacob only believes the news once he sees the wagons that Joseph had sent to carry Jacob back to Egypt (Gen. 45:27). The narrator contrasts Jacob’s conversion of belief by moving from the language of a “numb” heart to a “revived” spirit. This language is similar to how the prophets will describe lack of faithful obedience to the Lord as “numbness” (Hab. 1:4), and faith as a “new heart” (Jer. 31:33–34; Ezek. 36:26).<sup>9</sup> Once again, the story of Joseph’s reunion with his family is extraordinary in its own right, but the story is crafted as a picture of God’s relationship with his people. Especially, this story is meant to foreshadow the way in which the house of Israel will struggle to believe that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, and has been made Lord, with all authority in heaven and on earth.

In the final verse of Genesis 45, Jacob expresses his faith that his son Joseph is indeed alive, and that he will go to see Joseph before he dies (Gen. 45:28). Up to this point, in his ignorance and unbelief that Joseph is alive, the narrator calls him “Jacob.” Now that Joseph believes and determines to bring his entire family to Egypt to be reconciled to Joseph, the narrator calls him “Israel.”<sup>10</sup> Referring to Jacob with his national name is one more way in which this narrative is describing these events as the movement of a nation—a nation who represents a new humanity—down to Egypt.

## **The Purpose: Formed into a Nation (Gen. 46:1–7)**

The decision to leave Canaan and to go to Egypt is not insignificant. The patriarchs have regularly been tempted to leave the land of Canaan for Egypt, starting almost immediately upon Abram’s arrival to Canaan in Genesis 12:10. Abram’s journey to Egypt was sinful and disastrous, both

---

<sup>4</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 429.

<sup>5</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 586.

<sup>6</sup> Hamilton, 586.

<sup>7</sup> Kidner, *Genesis*, 219.

<sup>8</sup> Mathews, *Genesis 11*, 1B:819.

<sup>9</sup> Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 224.

<sup>10</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 587.

by his shameful expulsion from Egypt for lying about his marriage to Sarai, as well as for acquiring the Egyptian maidservant Hagar, through whom so much trouble came into the holy family (Gen. 16). Later, when Isaac began to go down to Egypt, God stopped him from doing so: “Do not go down to Egypt” (Gen. 26:2). Indeed, the land of Canaan was the object of promise in God’s covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. More than earthly real estate, the land of Canaan functioned as a type and a pledge of the heavenly country God had promised them (cf. Heb. 11:10, 16).<sup>11</sup>

For this reason, Jacob seeks the Lord before departing for Egypt. Apart from specific authorization from God, leaving the promised land would be unbelieving unfaithfulness to God’s promises and his command.<sup>12</sup> So, Jacob returns to Beersheba, to offer “sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac,” in the place where Isaac had dwelled for so many years.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, Isaac himself had built the altar in Beersheba (Gen. 26:25), presumably the same altar that Jacob uses for offering his sacrifices here.<sup>14</sup> But, where the Lord had forbidden Isaac from going down to Egypt, the Lord now tells Jacob, “Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt” (Gen. 46:3). Indeed, we should remember that God had previously told Abram that at some point his offspring would dwell as sojourners in a foreign land, afflicted for four hundred years (Gen. 15:13). Forbidding Isaac from going down to Egypt did not mean that God had abandoned that plan; rather, it simply means that only now is the time right in the course of God’s plans and purposes for the redemption he intends to accomplish through his people.<sup>15</sup>

This ends up being the last time that God is recorded as speaking to the patriarchs, and in this speech, God culminates all the prior speeches he has made to the patriarchs (cf. Gen. 15:1–21; 17:1–21; 22:1–18).<sup>16</sup> Especially, this is the fourth time that God will tell his patriarchs, “Do not fear” (cf. Gen. 15:1; 21:17; 26:24).<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, by naming Jacob twice (“Jacob, Jacob”), God echoes his last speech with Abraham (the first patriarch), and he anticipates the call of Moses in Exodus 3:4.<sup>18</sup> That call to Moses is the next time that we read of God’s speaking with anyone after this point in time.<sup>19</sup> Here, God insists that he will make Jacob into a great nation, and that he himself would go down with Jacob to Egypt, in order to bring him up again (Gen. 46:3–4). Furthermore, God promises that Joseph’s hand will close the eyes of Jacob in death (Gen. 46:4).

Having received this authorization, Jacob leaves for Beersheba (Gen. 46:5a). Again, we see the emphasis that this is the *nation* headed down to Egypt, when Genesis 46:5 shifts from speaking about “Jacob” to “Israel,” and then back to Israel again: “Then *Jacob* set out from Beersheba. The sons of *Israel* carried *Jacob* their father....” Jacob himself goes on this journey, of course, but this is less about the travels of one man, and more about the journey of the *nation* of Israel down to Egypt.<sup>20</sup> This idea

---

<sup>11</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:386–87.

<sup>12</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 440.

<sup>13</sup> Kidner, *Genesis*, 220.

<sup>14</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 589.

<sup>15</sup> Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 224–225.

<sup>16</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 440.

<sup>17</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 590.

<sup>18</sup> Mathews, *Genesis 11*, 1B:826.

<sup>19</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 440.

<sup>20</sup> Mathews, *Genesis 11*, 1B:827.

is emphasized in Gen. 46:7, by saying that Jacob brought *all* his offspring with him into Egypt. In the next section, that offspring will be listed out by name, and numbered.<sup>21</sup>

### The Path: Into the Furnace (Gen. 46:8–27)

In the final section of the narration of the journey down to Egypt, we gain a list of the names of the descendants of “Israel” who came into Egypt, “Jacob and his sons” (Gen. 46:8). In the first section, from Genesis 46:8–15, we have Jacob’s sons from Leah. We are told that there are thirty-three sons and daughters of Leah; however, this number does not include Leah, and it does not actually include Dinah, for we arrive at thirty-three names before reaching Dinah in v. 15, who would make thirty-four. Furthermore, we are reminded that Er and Onan already died (Gen. 46:12), dropping the number back to thirty-two. If we add Leah herself to the total, we would arrive at thirty-three, but v. 15 says that it is Jacob’s “sons and his daughters” who add up to thirty-three.

In the next section, we have the sons and the grandsons born to Jacob through Zilpah, “whom Laban gave to Leah his daughter” (Gen. 46:18). There are sixteen names in this list (Gen. 46:18), and this number would not include Zilpah herself. Then, in Genesis 46:19–22, we are told of the sons of Rachel. Notably, Rachel is uniquely identified as “Jacob’s wife” (Gen. 46:19; cf. 44:27). There are fourteen sons and grandsons born to Rachel (Gen. 46:22), but again, the numbering is a bit of a puzzle. Joseph, Manasseh, and Ephraim were already in Egypt, and, based on other genealogies, some of the “sons” of Benjamin appear actually to have been his grandsons (cf. Num. 26:38–40; 1 Chron; 7:6ff.; 8:1ff).<sup>22</sup> This is a bit strange, since Benjamin is still a “boy” at this time (cf. Gen. 44:30–34), suggesting that these grandsons would not have been born until later. Regardless, Rachel is not included in this number of fourteen, especially since she has died by this point (Gen. 35:19). Finally, in Genesis 46:23–25, we find the sons and grandsons of Jacob through Bilhah, “whom Laban gave to Rachel his daughter” (Gen. 46:25). These are indeed seven, without including Bilhah in the total.

If we add up the totals given to us at the end of each section (thirty-three, v. 15; sixteen, v. 18; fourteen, v. 22; seven, v. 25), then we do in fact reach the total of “seventy” persons tabulated for us in Genesis 46:27. As we have seen, though, the totals of the first set only works if we subtract out Er and Onan, while adding back in Dinah and Leah. Where it makes sense not to include Rachel, it is unclear why we do not include Zilpah and Bilhah in the totals, while still including Leah. Also, there is a question of whether we should include Joseph and his two sons in this total, since they were already in Egypt.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, why does Benjamin have grandchildren included in his totals, while the others do not seem to have similar lengths of their genealogies included? In sum, how do we make sense of the numbers given in this passage?

It is very important to understand that the purpose for this list is different from the purposes in which we might provide a similar kind of list. The emphasis of this list is not on mathematics. Rather, this list gives a typological number, using a round number with great significance ( $70 = 7 \times$

<sup>21</sup> Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 225.

<sup>22</sup> Kidner, *Genesis*, 221.

<sup>23</sup> Kidner, *Genesis*, 221.

10) to emphasize the fullness of the nation of Israel that traveled down to Egypt.<sup>24</sup> John Walton helpfully distinguishes the purpose of this list from an airplane manifest or a census document, to something more like a list of charter members of a settlement.<sup>25</sup> The point is not to give a perfect accounting of numbers, but instead to provide a number that gives us a theological association.

In this case, the number of seventy persons identified here associates this group with the seventy names given in the table of nations in Genesis 10.<sup>26</sup> There, the seventy persons (twenty-six descendants of Shem, thirty descendants of Ham, and the fourteen descendants of Japheth) represented the entirety of Noah's offspring. Furthermore, since the whole world had been destroyed with a flood, Noah represents a new Adam, and his offspring represent the entire race of humanity. Here, the seventy persons traveling to Egypt represent all the offspring of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This nation of Israel represents the entire race of the *new* humanity that God is raising up out of the world, through which he will bring his purposes of redemption and salvation to the world. This idea is reflected more fully later in Deuteronomy 32:8, when we read that God "fixed the borders of the peoples according to the number of the sons of Israel." The nation of Israel is not just one more nation among many; rather, Israel represents a new human race, set apart by God from all the nations of the earth. The number of seventy people coming out of Canaan into the land of Egypt will be noted again in Exodus 1:5 and Deuteronomy 10:22.<sup>27</sup>

This number of people going down to Egypt from Canaan also reflects the progress God has already made in his promises to make the offspring of Abraham into a great nation. The two references back to Laban in the reminders that Laban gave both Zilpah and Bilhah as maidservants to his respective daughters (Gen. 46:18, 25) reminds us of a time when Jacob was still childless, as well as to the conflict that Jacob had with Laban when he moved his family from Paddan-Aram to Canaan.<sup>28</sup> God has been faithful so far to fulfill his promises, so that Jacob has gone from no offspring to seventy offspring headed down to Egypt. Still, seventy people is still a very small number, but that will soon change as God rapidly multiplies the people of Israel in Egypt (Gen. 46:3; cf. Ex. 1:7).<sup>29</sup> God has been faithful to his people, and he will continue to be faithful to his people—even during their sojourn in the land of Egypt.

## Discussion Questions

1) Why does Jacob have a difficult time believing that Joseph is, indeed, alive? How does Jacob's heart foreshadow the unbelief of Israel, especially to believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ? Do we still need a "spirit...revived" in order to believe in Jesus? How does this passage demonstrate Jacob's faith as the turning point for the nation of Israel, as they follow the path set out for them by

---

<sup>24</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with New JPS Translation*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 317. Cited by Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 444.

<sup>25</sup> Walton, *The NIV Application Commentary: Genesis*, 685–86.

<sup>26</sup> For this whole paragraph, see Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 225.

<sup>27</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 442.

<sup>28</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 597.

<sup>29</sup> Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 225.

God? How will God use this nation for the redemption of the whole world?

2) Why must Jacob gain explicit authorization from God before leaving the promised land to go to Egypt? Where have we seen the patriarchs flirt with heading to Egypt before this point? How did those situations work out for them? Why did God insist that his people remain in Canaan up to this point? Why does God send them to Egypt now? How has Joseph served as the bridge between the people of God and their journey to Egypt?

3) Remember that God told Abraham many years before this that his descendants would spend four hundred years afflicted in a foreign land (Gen. 15:13). We have seen much suffering already in the life of Joseph; how will the rest of Joseph's extended family suffer in Egypt? Why does God let his people suffer so much, and for so long, in Egypt? What will God do through his interactions with Pharaoh in the Exodus story? How does this story set up that story?

4) What do you make of the math in the list of Jacob's descendants headed down to Egypt in Genesis 46:8–27? Why do you think that the numbers used are difficult to account for? How do these numbers serve a literary and theological purpose by their association with the seventy descendants of Noah's sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth, in Genesis 10? How does that association portray this people as a new human race in the midst of a sinful, corrupted, and dying human race?