**Vayigash – 3**

Third portion in triennial cycle

Bereshit 46:28 – 47:27

*Eitz Hayim* 283-289; Hertz 176-177; Plaut 294-297

Today’s parashah is the third part of Vayigash in the triennial cycle. It is readily divided into two parts. From 46:28 to 47:12, the parashah deals with settling Joseph’s father and his brothers in Goshen, and with introducing them to Pharaoh who seems happy to welcome them to Egypt. From 47:13 to the end of the parashah, it deals with what I will call Joseph’s agrarian policies in Egypt. Why the Masoretic text that is standard for almost all chumashim does not put a paragraph break between the two parts of the parashah, I cannot explain. However, I will deal exclusively with the latter part, which attracted my interest when I read Rabbi Plaut’s introduction to this material:

We learn about the effects of the famine and, so it seems to many, the *morally puzzling* aspects of Joseph’s economic and political management. (293; italics added)

We know that Joseph had what we might call a troubled adolescence, and that in several instances as a young man he found himself in a sexually charged family situation or a politically charged legal situation. But, from what we can read of the story, he behaved admirably in all of them. What’s this about *morally puzzling* management?

The Plaut chumash says nothing more said about the subject. *Eitz Hayim* is a bit more forthcoming. In the footnote to verses 23-24, it notes that Rashbam (Rabbi Shemuel ben Meir, one of Rashi’s grandsons) criticizes Joseph as “ruthless” though an earlier footnote states that “Joseph’s action must be judged in the context of ancient Near Eastern world, by whose norms Joseph emerges here as a shrewd, successful, and highly admirable administrator.” The Soncino Chumash is careful to link Rashbam’s comment not to Joseph’s agrarian policy but to the line in verse 21 about population displacement, which others say that Joseph imposed to ensure that former owners could no longer claim ownership on the basis of possession. Even this link is questionable. Serfs are different from slaves. They are bound to a piece of land, not to an individual, and in Egypt a large number of serfs were needed to farm the land. It is more likely that Joseph discerned that land was owned by many small-holders, and he took action to shift them from land owners to urban developers under royal ownership.

As indicated above, our classical sources are of little help in establishing Joseph’s alleged immorality when managing land. Fortunately, there are two other sources to which we can turn: First, Christian sources, and, second, my own experience dealing with farmer-led irrigation management schemes in modern Egypt. To start, let’s set the scene to see just what it was that Joseph did to modify agrarian policy in Biblical Egypt. Remember, the whole region had recently emerged from seven good years, which above all means that rain was ample, and it is now in the seven bad years, which above all means that there was little rain. Rain is the critical criterion because semi-arid areas are difficult to farm. Rainfall can be wildly different from one year to the next. As a result, farming has to focus more on minimizing risk than on maximizing profit.

The text is unfortunately confusing as to just where we were in the cycle of seven bad years—near the beginning, near the end or in the middle—but my suggestion is that we were part way along in the famine cycle. After all, in areas regularly susceptible to shifts from feast years to famine years, it seems unlikely that only Joseph stored some excess for future years. However, only Joseph (and presumably the royal court) knew that this famine was going to last seven years. And with his power as viceroy, he had imposed a grain tax to store away one-fifth of the excess crop in good years. I would guess that local farmers had enough put away for one or two years of famine, but not enough for seven years. Therefore, when the bad years persisted in Egypt, Joseph was able to bargain stored grain in exchange, first, for money; second, in exchange for livestock; and finally in exchange for land. In what is no doubt an exaggeration, Pharaoh ended up with all the money, all the livestock, and all the farm land in Egypt, and all the farmers as well.[[1]](#footnote-1) But here we must be careful. Is Joseph really dealing with all farmers? That is most unlikely. It is probably appropriate to say that he was dealing with the richer farmers, those who owned large blocks of land. The great bulk of farmers were already in a state of serfdom with or without Joseph’s changes in policy.

Among other things, note that, after having gained control of all the land, Joseph says that he can continue to supply one last portion of seed grain to the farmers, with the understanding that thereafter they should pass to Pharaoh one-fifth of all their output with four-fifths left for their families, for their animals and for seed for next year’s crops. In other words, the richer and larger farmers were not really serfs; they were share croppers free to manage their lands as they had in the past, so long as one-fifth of the output went to Pharaoh, which was more favourable terms than was common for share cropping elsewhere.

The very last verse in this parashah says that the serfs were grateful to Joseph, a statement that we should take with more than a few grains of sand, especially when it goes on to say that Joseph had “made it into a land law in Egypt, which is still valid . . .” (47:26). Indeed, it was very much the same pattern of land use that was evident when I worked in Egypt several millennia later. Perhaps the land itself had been redistributed, but the water was still nationalized and that determined whose land was at the head of the pumps, so they always got good crops, and whose land was near the end of the pipes, so they got less water and not such good crops. No wonder that some people wanted to form cooperatives for farmer-managed irrigation systems. Equally no wonder that, after more than 3000 years of what at best might be called “paternalism,” lots of farmers were reluctant to change.

Ignoring the cheers from those whom I describe as the richer farmers, to what extent can we judge Joseph? He was certainly not financially corrupt; the text is clear that he passed all of the proceeds of his nationalization to Pharaoh. But was he morally corrupt? On this subject, we find a rather strong “yes” in at least some modern Christian commentary. Perhaps most offensive is an essay by Arthur Adask, who seems to be a contrarian in every respect. In an essay published on his own website, he writes that Joseph was “arguably a diabolical sonofabitch” who enslaved the whole Egyptian people, and then goes on to call him the world’s first John Maynard Keynes. As an economist who leans toward keynsianism, I suggest that Adask’s view is contradictory. Arguably, it was Joseph’s proto-keynsian policies that saved the kingdom from collapse.

More useful, though equally critical of Joseph, is a 2016 article by Professor Kilnam Cha at Abilene Christian College entitled “Joseph’s Unjust Economic Policies in Genesis 47:13-26.” However, it is not from any analysis of those policies themselves that Cha comes to his conclusion, but rather from his reading of earlier parts of Genesis, in which he finds a God-determined break with existing cultures so that the Israelites become the world’s first society of self-governing peasants—and he found that pattern totally inconsistent with Joseph’s policies in Egypt. But the Egyptian peasants were serfs without independence. In short, Cha’s error is not in his criticism of Joseph but in his misconception of Egyptian society in Biblical days.

To the side of either of the previous articles is one by Douglas Grote in 2012 entitled “The Fate of Keynesian Faith in Joseph’s Countercyclical Morals.” The article, published in a little known journal called *Counterpunch.*  Gote’s article stays far away from religion but praises Joseph for recognizing Keynes’ general principle of keeping an economy in balance by taxing during times of plenty and releasing funds, or even going into debt, in times of scarcity. That is exactly how Joseph managed agriculture in Egypt.

I found a dozen or so more articles about Joseph and his agrarian policies for Egypt, but a d’var is not a PhD dissertation so I need not cite all of them. Therefore, just to balance the religious scales a bit, I will close with an excerpt from an essay published by the Theology of Work (TOW) Project, which is an independent but clearly Christian NGO. More than any of the other articles I read, TOW looks behind the words and suggests how Joseph actually operated with their conclusions described in a in a serious but almost amusing way:

As his first act, “Joseph...went through all the land of Egypt” ([Gen. 41:46](https://biblia.com/bible/nrsv/Gen.%2041.46)) on an inspection tour. He would have to become familiar with the people who managed agriculture, the locations and conditions of the fields, the crops, the roads, and means of transportation. It is inconceivable that Joseph could have accomplished all of this on a personal level. He would have had to establish and oversee the training of what amounted to a Department of Agriculture and Revenue.

Shabbat Shalom,

Selected sources

Adask: https://adask.wordpress.com/2010/11/20/the-story-of-joseph-the-worlds-first-economist%E2%80%94or-%E2%80%9Cthose-who-wont-learn-from-history-%E2%80%9D/

Cha: https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol24/iss4/6/

Grote: https://www.counterpunch.org/2012/11/30/the-fate-of-keynesian-faith-in-josephs-countercyclical-moral/

TOW Project: https://www.theologyofwork.org/old-testament/genesis-12-50-and-work/joseph-genesis-372-5026/josephs-successful-management-of-the-food-crisis-genesis-4146-57-4713-26

1. An exception must be made for the priesthood, which had its own land. Indeed, there is a remarkable parallel between Egyptian priests and, much later in Jewish history, Levite priests. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)