

# Meeting the most powerful man in the world

## A meditation on Genesis 47:7-10

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Last week we witnessed the inauguration of Donald J. Trump with all its pomp and circumstance. There is a new president in the White House. Whether they like him or not, people will have to get used to the idea, and nations around the world will need to be on good terms with him. No doubt, in coming days and weeks representatives of many nations will pay courtesy visits to the new president.

Genesis 47 tells us about a courtesy visit to the most powerful man in the *ancient* world, the Pharaoh of Egypt. The visitor in this case is an old man, a simple shepherd, Jacob. Of course, Jacob is not a politician and the only reason for the meeting is that Jacob is the father of Joseph, the viceroy of Egypt. But according to the custom of the time it would have been important for Joseph to introduce his father to the king. It is a social visit. The atmosphere is intimate and relaxed. And yet... there is more to the meeting than meets the eye.

Jacob had been reluctant to come to Egypt. He came because there was a famine in Canaan and because the LORD had encouraged him to do so. "Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt," the LORD had said, "for there I will make you into a great nation. I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again, and Joseph's hand shall close your eyes" (Gen 46:3-4).

When Jacob and his sons and their families arrived in Egypt, of course, this had to be reported to Pharaoh. It is interesting to see how Joseph goes about informing the king about this. He tells Pharaoh that his brothers are *shepherds, keepers of livestock*, and that they have brought their flocks and herds (46:32). And Joseph instructed his brothers: "When Pharaoh invites you to come and see him, tell him that you have always been keepers

of livestock, for every shepherd is an abomination to the Egyptians."

Why did Joseph take this approach? The main reason, we may assume, is that he did not want his own people to assimilate with the Egyptians. He wanted them to live separately in order that they continue to serve the Lord (not the gods of Egypt).

Joseph's brothers play the game well. When they are invited to visit Pharaoh, they tell him they are shepherds and that this is what they have always been. In addition, they mention that they have no intention to settle won in Egypt permanently. "We have come to *sojourn* in the land," they say.

The meeting goes well. Pharaoh welcomes Joseph's brothers and allows them to settle in Goshen, a part of the country that was good for keeping livestock.

After the business has been done and the important decisions have been made, Joseph brings in his old father Jacob so that he too can meet Pharaoh. It must have been something to behold. On the one hand you have the most powerful man of the ancient world, seated on his throne in his palace, surrounded by his servants and all the glamour that befits the mighty king of Egypt. On the other hand there is this old man who has lived in the countryside all his life. With his tanned skin and his shepherd clothes he stands out as someone from a different world.

At the same time, there is something special and impressive about Jacob. Obviously, this man is very, very old. Keep in mind that old age was respected in the ancient world. When someone lived very long, it was seen as a blessing of the gods. Little did

the Egyptians know that this old man was hugely blessed indeed. He carried the blessing of the God who has made heaven and earth.

Joseph guides his father into the throne room and puts him before Pharaoh. What does the protocol of the Egyptian court require? Presumably a visitor needs to bow down before Pharaoh and wait for Pharaoh to speak. In this case, it seems like something unexpected happens. We read that "Jacob blessed Pharaoh!" This may not have been entirely appropriate according to protocol, but it is hugely appropriate according to the status of Jacob as the carrier of God's blessing.

### Jacob's testimony

Pharaoh comes up with a nice question to get the conversation going: "How many are the days of the years of your life?" In Western culture it is not appropriate to start a conversation by asking about someone's age. In the ancient world it was a way to show respect to elderly people. So how do you respond when the most powerful man in the world asks you how old you are? Obviously, this is a golden opportunity for Jacob to talk about his achievements and tell his host how he's had a long, blessed life.

Not so Jacob. Listen to his answer: "The days of the years of my sojourning are 130 years. Few and evil have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not attained to the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their sojourning." Pharaoh must have been startled by this answer, and even for us it is not easy to make sense of Jacob's words. Why does he sound so negative and gloomy? I mean, the man has lived 130 years! How can he say his days have been few? To add to this, he has a large family and one of his sons is the viceroy of Egypt! How can he say his days have been evil?

Some exegetes have tried to explain the negative meaning away. John Calvin, for example, has suggested that Jacob is not complaining about his

own life but that he is rather celebrating the long life of his fathers. It is as if Jacob is saying: You may think that 130 years is amazing but it is nothing if compared to my fathers.

I do not find this explanation convincing. Whatever you make of Jacob's comments about his ancestors, he is still saying that his own days have been evil. So the question remains: what do we make of Jacob's testimony?

Let us start by recognizing that there is truth to Jacob's words. Although he has lived for 130 years, his father and grandfather had lived much longer, and it seems like Jacob felt that his days on earth were coming to an end. It is also true that he has experienced much evil in his life. As a young man he had to flee from his father's house to Mesopotamia. He was deceived by his father-in-law so that he had to work two times 7 years for his beloved wife Rachel. His only daughter had been raped. His favourite wife had died early. For years he had been under the impression that his favourite son had been killed by a wild animal. Jacob's life had been marked by much suffering and grief. So if that is the reality, let's just allow the old man to say it. Let's not put pressure on him to sugar-coat things.

Now we would have liked to hear Jacob saying something positive about the Lord's blessings in his life. It would have been so nice if Jacob has said what he said to his sons in the next chapter: The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, this God has been my shepherd all my life long to this day, the angel who has redeemed me from all evil... (Gen. 48:15-16).

At the same time, Jacob's faith is coming through in what he says. I'd like you to note the word *sojourner* which he uses twice. The days of my *sojourning* are 130 years but they are not like the days of my fathers in their *sojourning*. I'm like my fathers, Jacob says. We are sojourners. Wherever we have lived, we have been aliens. Also here in Egypt, we are sojourners. We do not intend to stay

here forever. In Jacob's own mind this meant: We look forward to taking possession of the land which our God has promised to give to us. We live by faith in God's promises. And because of this faith, Jacob told his sons to bury him back in the land of Canaan in the cave which Abraham had bought as a burying place (Gen. 49:29-30).

In other words, we should not be too quick to accuse Jacob of being gloomy and depressed. Rather, he demonstrates the honesty and faith that you sometimes find in elderly people. They have seen it all and they say it like it is: I have gone through many troubles in my life and I'm looking forward to the new heaven and the new earth. It is the kind of honesty that comes through in the apostle Paul's words to his new converts: "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:23). It is the kind of faith that is described in Hebrews 11. It is the attitude of people who desire a better country, a heavenly one (Hebr. 11:15).

### Jacob's blessing

This brings us to the other main aspect of Jacob's meeting with Pharaoh: It is mentioned two times that Jacob blessed Pharaoh. Jacob blessed Pharaoh when he arrived and then he blessed him again when he left.

Here we need to keep in mind the rule of Hebrews 7:7 – "Without doubt the lesser person is blessed by the greater." This sheds light on the event. People might think that Pharaoh is the greater, the most powerful man in the world, and that the old Jacob is the lesser of the two. But in reality it is the other way around. Jacob is greater because he is the source of a blessing that surpasses anything Pharaoh has to offer.

What happens here reminds us of God's promise to Abraham: "I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen. 12:2-

3). Here we see an initial fulfillment of that promise: Pharaoh had welcomed Jacob and his people, God's chosen ones, and according to the promise of God he would be blessed himself as a result.

The next passage tells us how this happened: While many nations were suffering from drought and hunger, there was enough food in Egypt. The land experienced peace and prosperity because they treated Abraham's descendants well. Many, many years later a descendant of Jacob came down to Egypt to find safety and protection from those who persecuted him. I'm talking about the Jesus, the son of Joseph and Mary. And again the land of Egypt would be blessed. Egypt was one of the first countries where people got to hear the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ. Even today there are still Christian churches in Egypt that date back to the first centuries after Christ.

It is an important theme in the Bible. The presence of God's people brings blessing to the society in which they live. There are many examples of this in the history of the world. The Roman Empire benefited from the presence of Christians in the society. So did nations in Western Europe. So did Canada and the United States, and Australia, and South Korea, and countries in Africa.

It was encouraging to see that the Lincoln Bible is still used during the inauguration of a new American president. It was good to hear one of the ministers read the words from 1 Timothy 2:1-6 where the name of our Saviour is mentioned explicitly: "For there is one God, and there is no mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all." We do not know what to expect from the new government in the USA. Many people have concerns. May it be so that the new government in the USA has an awareness that their success depends on the blessing of God more than anything else. May there be a willingness to honour God and to promote the kingdom of Jesus Christ.

And let us as Christians not stop praying for rulers and kings. It is true, we are only sojourners here, but let us seek blessing for our own nation and for the world at large. We have a God who finds pleasure in blessing people. He blesses his own people in the first place but He also shows his goodness to all people in the world.



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One last thought about Jacob. It is remarkable if you reflect on it: As a young man Jacob tried to steal the blessing by deceiving his father Isaac. His life had been a long journey of learning to live by faith in the God of his father. Jacob had to learn that he was not able to take hold of the blessing by his own power or craftiness. He's learned that lesson. And here we have him in his old age, now a source of blessing for others, even for the mighty king of Egypt, because Jacob is Israel, God's chosen instrument to bring blessing to the world.