Jacob Goes to Egypt

While I was in the Air Force, I spent almost the entire 4 years of my enlistment at Shaw Air Force Base in Sumter. I found myself back in Sumter in 1984 as a branch manager of the bank I had gone to work for after finishing college. I reconnected with some men I had known in the Air Force who had retired and stayed in Sumter. It was an odd collection of nco’s and officers from all parts of the country who had one thing in common; Shaw was their last duty assignment and they decided to remain there after retirement. It might seem that the natural tendency would be to move back home after retirement but these were men who had moved all over the world during their careers and may have been raised as children of military families constantly on the move. Even for those with permanent roots in another area often staying where they are is the path of least resistance. Often work opportunities will lead us to settle in another area. I’m an example of that having grown up in middle Tennessee but I’ve lived in South Carolina since 1978. In chapter 47 of Genesis, we see a family that had lived in Canaan many years preparing to move to Egypt.

The chapter begins with Joseph presenting his brothers and fathers to Pharoah. As Joseph had previously instructed, they told Pharaoh that they were shepherds and that they would like to settle in Goshen. Note that they told Pharaoh they came to live *awhile*, perhaps an indication that they did not want Pharaoh to be concerned that they would remain in Egypt for an extended period. When Joseph introduced Jacob to Pharaoh who asked Jacob’s age, he replied that he was 130 years old and that his years had been hard and few. While 130 years does not seem few, it was few in comparison to his ancestors, some of whom lived several hundred years. Goshen was located in the northeastern Nile Delta region of Egypt near the border of Canaan. Today the nearby Suez Canal connects the region to the Red Sea.

As the famine worsened residents of both Egypt and Canaan came to Joseph exchanging their money for food and eventually Joseph had collected all the money they had for Pharaoh. When people asked for more food, Joseph had them give up their livestock in exchange for food. When the famine persisted, the people offered the only possession they had left which was their land and Joseph acquired all the land in Egypt for Pharaoh. The people then became slaves to Pharaoh working the land they previously owned as sharecroppers giving twenty percent of their crops to Pharaoh. Verse 27 says that the Israelites acquired property in Goshen which must have been previously owned by Egyptians (this may have contributed to the animosity between the Israelites and Egyptians years later). It would seem that the Israelites were the only ones who were successful in retaining their property and they were fruitful. The chapter ends with Jacob making Joseph promise to bury him in Canaan when he died.

It is ironic that the Israelites were the only people who remained free owning their land while the Egyptians gave up their land and served in bondage to Pharaoh. Generations later as Exodus unfolds the tables had turned and it was the Israelites who were in bondage to Pharaoh. During the course of 400 years the fortunes of the Israelites changed, however they did multiply greatly growing from a family of 70 to a nation of perhaps 2 million. Jacob lived 17 years in Egypt before his death and it was important to him to return to his roots to be buried since God had promised Canaan as an inheritance for his family. I think Joseph also saw the importance of returning to Canaan and did not see Egypt as a permanent home but rather a location to survive the famine. As both of these men had a close relationship with God, this could be viewed as similar to Christians who see earth as a temporary residence while their permanent home is in Heaven. I think Joseph chose Goshen as their home because it was the closest inhabitable region in Egypt to Canaan. It was also a sparsely populated area and I believe he wanted the least amount of interaction with the Egyptians as possible to avoid their negative influences. He prophesied that God would return his family to Canaan (50:24) and like Jacob made his children promise to return his bones to be buried in Canaan. He could not have known that it would be 440 years before the Israelites would return home. It would seem that after Joseph’s death the family chose to remain comfortably in Egypt rather than undertaking an uncertain journey back to the home they had left years before. This long delay was actually part of God’s plan to build up the nation of Israel so they would be prepared to subdue the people who would oppose them as they returned to Canaan.