

Genesis 40

God planned to save His chosen family from a seven-year famine in Egypt. But to do that, He wanted one of “His” men in control in Egypt. Joseph was in prison after the events of chapter 39, which provided him the opportunity to interpret these dreams, which eventually will bring him to the attention of Pharaoh. Ultimately, as God works “behind the scenes,” in contrast to miracles, He brings Joseph to a position of authority in Egypt, in order to save the family of Israel. Joseph was 30 years old when he stood before Pharaoh (41:46) and he spent two more years in prison (41:1) so he is now 28 years old. Eleven years have passed since he was first sold into slavery by his brothers (37:2). We do not know how long he served Potiphar, in chapter 39, nor how long he was in prison before he interpreted the dreams here.

TRANSLATION - 40:1-4:

1 Now it was after these things the butler of the king of Egypt and the one baking sinned against their master, the king of Egypt. **2** Pharaoh was angry at his two officers, against the chief of the butlers and against the chief of the bakers. **3** He gave them into the custody of the house of the chief of the guard over the house of the prison, a place where Joseph was bound there. **4** The chief of the guard put in charge Joseph over them and he cared for them and they were days in custody.

WORDS:

“Sinned” (verse 1; appears 240 times) was first seen at 20:6, 9; then again at 31:39. It means literally “to miss a goal or mark” but figuratively, to “sin”. In this context, the word likely does not carry its theological connotation (“sin”) but a more general meaning, “to displease.” “To be angry” (verse 2) is used 34 times. “To be bound” (verse 3; appears 73 times) means to “bind, fetter, imprison.”

ARCHAEOLOGY:

“Butler” and “baker” (verse 1) were important positions for the Pharaoh. The butler was a confidante to the king (cf. Neh. 1:11-2:8). The “house of the prison” was used frequently at the end of chapter 39.

COMMENTS:

Moses informs us that the chief butler and chief baker displeased Pharaoh, which sets the stage for their imprisonment where Joseph was. Just as Potiphar had put all his house under the control of Joseph (39:4), so the head of the prison house also put everything under Joseph’s control. Joseph was 17 years old when he was first sold into slavery by his brothers (37:2) and was thirty years old when he stood before Pharaoh (41:46). That suggests he was in bondage in some form for thirteen years.

APPLICATION:

Contemporaries in the text - Joseph continues to be faithful to God despite his circumstances and God blesses Joseph, who in turn, blesses his masters.

Contemporaries of Moses - Israel has many reasons to believe that if they remain faithful to God, they will be blessed by God just as Joseph was.

TRANSLATION - 40:5-8:

5 Then the two dreamed a dream, each dreamed in the night, each man, an interpretation of the dream of the butler and the baker who [worked] for the king of Egypt who were bound in the house of the prison.

6 Joseph came to them in the morning and he saw them and behold, [they were] pitiful. **7** So he asked the officers of Pharaoh who [were] with him in custody of the house of his master saying, “Why [are] your faces evil today?”

8 They said to him, “A dream we have dreamed and one interpreting there is not with him.” Joseph said to them, “Do not interpretations [belong] to God? Recount [them], please, to me.”

WORDS:

“To dream” (the verb, verse 5; 29 times) and “dream” (the noun; 65 times) are related words and was found in 28:12 and extensively in chapter 37 and here in 40 (40:5, 8) and 41 (41:1, 5, 11, 15). “Pitiful” (verse 6) is only used elsewhere at Daniel 1:10. “Evil” (verse 7) does not mean moral evil here as it often does; it means “bad” or “troubled.” “To interpret” (verse 8) is found only in Genesis (40:8, 16, 22; 41:8, 12-13, 15). The same thing is true of the noun “interpretations” (40:5, 8, 12, 18; 41:11). “To recount” (107 times) was first seen in 15:5; it is related to the word for “book, scroll” as well as “number” and “scribe.”

COMMENTS:

God’s intention is for Joseph to interpret Pharaoh’s dreams in chapter 41. To accomplish that goal, Joseph will interpret these dreams to gain a sense of trust among Pharaoh’s official. So, God sends both the baker and the butler a dream in the same night. There is some similarity in the dreams.

When Joseph saw the men the next morning, after the dreams, they were dejected, pitiful looking, because they did not understand the significance, the interpretation, of the dreams. So, Joseph asked what troubled them.

They both respond that they have had their respective dreams and they have no idea what the dreams mean. Joseph responds by stating that interpretations belong to God (cf. 41:16, 25, 28, 32). So, he asked them to share their dreams. The Bible has not presented another man, yet, who interprets dreams. The Egyptians and other cultures had professional “dream interpreters.” Of course, the baker and butler had no access to these interpreters, since they were in prison. These interpreters were professionals, using books intended to help explain the meaning and importance of dreams. Joseph certainly did not fit that description but he knew God could interpret the dreams.

APPLICATION:

Contemporaries in the text - God has communicated through visions before but this is the first time one of His servants has interpreted dreams and these dreams are from people who were not Hebrews, not members of the Israelite family.

Contemporaries of Moses - God can give non-Israelites dreams and communicate with them if it suits His purposes. God will forbid listening to soothsayers and command Israel to listen to His prophets (Deut. 18:10-22).

Later Hebrew writers - God will communicate through dreams to Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon (Dan. 2, 4).

NT writers - God communicated to the wisemen, in some way, to tell them that the King of the Jews was born (Matt. 2).

TRANSLATION - 40:9-15:

9 So the chief of the butlers recounted his dream to Joseph and he said to him, “In my dream, even behold, a vine [was] before me. **10** And in the vine, three tendrils and when it was budding, its blossoms went up, they ripened and its clusters of grapes. **11** And the cup of Pharaoh [was] in my hand and I took the grapes and I pressed them to the cup of Pharaoh and I gave the cup to the palm of Pharaoh.”

12 Then Joseph said to him, “This [is] its interpretation: Three branches [are] these three days. **13** Within three days, Pharaoh will lift up your head and he will bring you back to your office and you will give the cup of Pharaoh in his hand according to the former custom when you were his butler. **14** Except if you remember me, yourself, just as he does good to you, even do, please, to me, loving loyalty and remember me to Pharaoh and bring me up from this

house. **15** Because to be stolen, I was stolen from the land of the Hebrews and even here I have not done anything that they put me in the cistern.”

WORDS:

“Vine” (verse 9) is found 55 times. “Blossoms” is found here and Isaiah 18:5 and Job 15:33. “To ripen” (verse 10; 55 times) normally means “to boil.” “Grapes” are used nineteen times. “Cup” (verse 11) is found 41 times but in Genesis, only here (40:11, 13, 21). “To press” is only used here in the OT. “Loving loyalty” was first used in Genesis 19:19; see comments there.

GRAMMAR:

“To be stolen I was stolen” (verse 15) is the Hebrew emphatic construction, the infinitive absolute followed by the perfect tense of the same verb.

ARCHAEOLOGY:

This is the only occurrence of the phrase “the land of the Hebrews” (verse 15). The “cistern” was that location of Joseph’s temporary imprisonment by his brothers in chapter 37.

COMMENTS:

The chief butler speaks first. In his dream, he saw three clusters of grapes, the number of three being significant. He dreamed that he served wine once again to Pharaoh. Joseph tells him that the three symbolizes three days. After three days, Pharaoh will “lift up his head”, bring him out of prison, back into his service. The butler will once again serve wine to the Pharaoh.

Since Joseph had predicted the butler’s restoration, he asks the butler to tell Pharaoh about him. Joseph uses the word for “loving loyalty” and asks the butler to display this virtue to him, before Pharaoh. Joseph emphasizes that he was stolen from the land of the Hebrews. But Joseph has not done anything worthy of imprisonment. If we were reading the text for the first time, we would wonder if the butler would remember Joseph.

APPLICATION:

Contemporaries in the text - God can care for His people in most unusual ways and through unusual means. The fact that Joseph refers to Canaan as the “land of the Hebrews” shows that Joseph understood and believed that God had promised that land to the descendants of Abraham. That promise will sustain Joseph through his life (cf. 50:24-25).

Contemporaries of Moses - The “land of the Hebrews” will be the destination of the Israelites once they leave Egypt.

TRANSLATION - 40:16-19:

16 So the chief of the bakers saw that good [was] the interpretation so he said to Joseph, “Even I, myself, in my dream and behold, three baskets of cakes [were] on my head.

17 And in the upper basket, from all the food of Pharaoh, the work of the baker, and the birds were eating them from the basket from on my head.”

18 So Joseph answered and he said, “This [is] is interpretation: Three baskets [are] three days these. **19** Within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head from on you and he will hang you on a tree and the bird will eat your flesh from on you.”

WORDS:

This word for “baskets” (verse 16) is found fifteen times. This is the only place where this word for “cakes” is found. “To hang” (verse 19) is used 40 times, here for the first time in Genesis (40:19, 22; 41:13).

ARCHEOLOGY:

An Egyptian dictionary lists 38 types of cake and 57 types of bread. The Egyptians apparently loved their baked goods! To expose a dead body to nature was intended to keep the spirit from rest in the next life.

COMMENTS:

When Joseph gave the butler a positive interpretation to his dream, the baker was optimistic in sharing his dream with Joseph. The number three in the baker's dream was also significant. He saw three loaves of cakes in a basket on his head. In the upper basket were some cakes, different types of baked goods for Pharaoh, but the birds swooped down and ate the bread from the basket.

Joseph interpreted the baker's dream but it was not a positive interpretation. The three symbolizes three days; after three days, Pharaoh will "lift up his head" (notice the identical wording for each interpretation) and bring the baker out of prison but not to restore him to service to Pharaoh. Instead, Pharaoh will hang the baker on a tree and the birds will eat his flesh.

APPLICATION:

Contemporaries in the text - Despite the negative nature of the baker's dream, Joseph told it to him anyway. When a message is from God, you have to share what God says. If a message is negative, there is no white-washing the truth.

TRANSLATION - 40:20-23:

20 Then it was on the third day, the day of the birth of Pharaoh, and he made a banquet for all his servants and he lifted up the head of the chief of the butlers and the head of the chief of the bakers among his servants. **21** Then he returned the chief of the butlers to his butlership and he gave the cup on the hand of Pharaoh.

22 And the chief of the bakers he hang just as Joseph interpreted for them. **23** But the chief of the butlers did not remember Joseph but he forgot him.

WORDS:

"Banquet" (verse 20) was first seen in 19:3. "To remember" (verse 23) was first used in 8:1; see comments there.

COMMENTS:

This short paragraph shows the fulfillment of the two interpretations. After the third day, Pharaoh held a birthday party and threw a banquet for his servants. It might have also been the day he celebrated his accession as the divine son of the god Re (compare Jehoiachin in 2 Kings 25:27). In a literary fulfillment of Joseph's words, Pharaoh "lifted up" the heads of the butler and baker. In a literal fulfillment, he returned the chief butler to his position and he hung the baker, just as Joseph had interpreted. We now know that God works through Joseph to interpret dreams. God sends the dreams to one, or two persons, and then He sends the interpretation to another person.

Unfortunately, the chief butler did not remember Joseph when he was restored to Pharaoh's service. To emphasize the point, Moses writes "but he forgot him." We see at 41:1 that Joseph remained in prison another two full years.

APPLICATION:

Contemporaries in the text - Now that Joseph has experienced God predicting the future through him (interpreting others' dreams), he might have a better idea of the significance of his own dreams as a child, in chapter 37.

Contemporaries of Moses - Israel could see Joseph was a prophet (note in verse 22, the phrase: "just as Joseph interpreted it for them"), guided by the Spirit of God. Therefore, when Joseph anticipated his return out of Egypt to the promised land (50:24-25) Israel would

have confidence in him. Criminals, under the Law of Moses, who had been executed, normally by stoning, could also be hung as a warning to others (Deut. 21:22-23).

Later Hebrew writers - We have an example of the Law being illustrated in Joshua 8:29; 10:26.

NT writers - As we have seen several times already, Stephen discusses the history of Israel in his speech in Acts 7 and he mentions Joseph in Acts 7:9-18.