

Genesis 39 Joseph in Potiphar's House

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Overview

This chapter makes the most frequent use of “and it came to pass” of any chapter in the Hebrew OT. (ch. 38 is the second most prevalent). In addition, it makes the most frequent use of *wayyehi* in any form (second is Gen 1).

Note that a simple predicative *wayyehi* often sets up for a following “and it came to pass.” Thus v.2 sets up for 5, 6b for 7, and 21-23 (20b?) for 40:1.

1, Resumption from ch. 37

And Joseph.—This verse resumes the narrative of ch. 37. Mechanisms:

- It is subject-initial. “Now as for Joseph—remember him?”
- It recalls the details of 37:36.

Potiphar.—He is given three titles here:

- “officer of Pharaoh” indicates a high-ranking court official. The term later was applied to eunuchs, but there is no evidence that it has this meaning here.
- “captain of the guard” literally means “chief of the executioners.” We will see that the royal prison was under his responsibility. He has power of life and death, and is thus an extremely powerful person.
- “an Egyptian” reminds us that he is not (as Joseph would become) a foreigner who had risen to power, but native-born nobility. (Adherents of a late exodus put Joseph in the time of the Hyksos, 1700-1550 BC, but Gen 15:13 and 1 Kings 6:1 put Joseph about 1900 BC; the Hyksos may be the other kings of Exod 1:8.)

2-6a, Joseph in Prosperity

The general pattern here is a preface setting the scene with durative predications in *wayyehi*, followed by one or more “it came to pass” sections explaining what happened during that time. The force of the introductory predications is marked by the explicit *wayyehi*. This is an ongoing state of affairs or situation that sets the stage for the things that “came to pass.”

Note the relation among the repeated statements in this section. Each segment picks up where the previous leaves off, and carries us a step further in time. The lesson here is that success in worldly affairs comes from the Lord’s hand.

2, The Lord’s Prior Blessing	3-4, The Master’s Decision	5-6a, The Lord’s Subsequent Blessing
	3 And his master saw that	
2 And the LORD was with Joseph,	the LORD <i>was</i> with him,	
and he was a prosperous	and that the LORD made all	

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man;	that he did to prosper in his hand.	
	4 And Joseph found grace in his sight,	
and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian.	and he served him:	
	and he made him overseer over his house, and all <i>that</i> he had he put into his hand.	5 And it came to pass from the time <i>that</i> he had made him overseer in his house, and over all that he had,
		that the LORD blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; and the blessing of the LORD was upon all that he had in the house, and in the field.
		6 And he left all that he had in Joseph's hand; and he knew not ought he had, save the bread which he did eat.

2, The Lord's Initial Blessing

v.2 is phrased with explicit “to be” verbs, indicating that these conditions were persistent, ongoing states of affairs.

2 And the LORD was with Joseph.—the basis for any blessing. Cf. other references to this state throughout the OT. Recall comment on this on 26:3. Two characteristics of this promise when it appears in the Bible.

1. It often encourages God’s people in times of difficulty: “If Jesus goes with me, I’ll go anywhere.”
 - a. 26:24, Isaac after being chased from Gerar
 - b. 28:15, Jacob fleeing Esau
 - c. 39:2,21, Joseph in slavery and in prison
 - d. Jer 1:8, 19; 15:20, Jeremiah in the face of opposition to his prophecy
 - e. Jer 30:11; 46:28, the nation through chastisement
 - f. Isa 43:1-5, promise to Israel in times of trial.
2. It is ultimately messianic. Messiah’s name is “Immanu-el,” God with us. This name was initially given when Judah was threatened by a powerful military coalition of Syria and Israel, Isa 7. The Lord’s departing promise was, “Lo, I am with you always,” Matt. 28:20.

and he was a prosperous man.—This one expects to be the outcome of the Lord’s persistent presence.

and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian.—The specific form that the prosperity takes. He was not a field worker, but a household servant, a much more comfortable position.

3-4, Joseph's Promotion

This paragraph repeats the facts of the previous one, as seen through Potiphar's eyes, and then goes the next step to report Joseph's promotion to overseer.

3 And his master saw.—Like Jacob, Potiphar recognized Joseph's potential. He was conscious not only that Joseph's work prospered, but also of the cause, that the Lord was with him. This consciousness reflects a testimony on Joseph's part. Like the slave girl in Naaman's household (2 Kings 5:1-3), he

- recognized that his physical circumstances didn't invalidate the Lord's love and care for him;
- was willing to speak of the Lord to his master, and credit the Lord with his success

This is counter to the "Campus Crusade" strategy of trying to evangelize the BMOC as a way to attract others. The Lord has not called many wise, noble, or mighty; he uses foolish things to confound the things that are wise. We must not be afraid to bear witness uphill.

that the LORD *was* with him,

and that the LORD made all that he did to prosper in his hand.

4 And Joseph found grace in his sight, and he served him.—Note Joseph's response to favor from his owner. He does not seek to take advantage of it, but rather works even harder to serve him. He anticipates the instruction of the NT to servants, and by extension, to employees: Eph 6:5; Col 3:22, "Servants, obey in all things *your* masters according to the flesh; not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but in singleness of heart, fearing God: 23 And whatsoever ye do, do *it* heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men; 24 Knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance: for ye serve the Lord Christ."

and he made him overseer over his house.—Potiphar's perception of Joseph's abilities matches Jacob's. He places Joseph in a position of authority, just as Jacob had.

5-6a, Continued Prosperity

This third paragraph begins at the point that Joseph is made overseer and moves forward from there. In vv.2,3, the Lord gives prosperity to Joseph. Now he bestows his blessings on Potiphar.

Calvin: We here see how abundantly the grace of God is poured out upon the faithful, since a portion of his kindness flows from them even to the reprobate.

6b-18, Joseph and Potiphar's Wife

Just as ch. 37 gave us a case study in yielding to sin, this section gives us a case study in resisting it. The frequent repetition of "and it came to pass" gives prominence to the temporal changes. Moses is calling our attention to the discrete scenes. Each scene has a specific lesson on how temptation works, how we should respond to it, and what we may expect from it. To be forewarned is to be forearmed.

And Joseph was a goodly person, and well favoured.—The repetition of Joseph's name suggests the start of a new section. The explicit *wayyehi* presents this as an ongoing state that gives the background for what is to follow.

The description is identical with that of Rachel in 29:17. It means literally “beautiful in form and beautiful in appearance.” He had a good figure and a good face. This attractiveness is one more blessing from the Lord, but it stimulates the lust of Potiphar's wife, and thus opens the next chapter in Joseph's history.

There is a general principle here concerning temptation: it can arise from God's blessings. He does not tempt any man with evil, but our sinfulness is so pervasive that we can stumble on his blessings. The OT repeatedly links Israel's apostasy with the prosperity that God gave her.

- Deut 6:10-12; 8:11-14 anticipate such a danger for Israel once they inherit the land.
- Deut 31:20 For when I shall have brought them into the land which I swear unto their fathers, that floweth with milk and honey; and they shall have eaten and filled themselves, and waxen fat; then will they turn unto other gods, and serve them, and provoke me, and break my covenant.
- Deut 32:25 But Jeshurun waxed fat, and kicked: thou art waxen fat, thou art grown thick, thou art covered *with fatness*; then he forsook God *which* made him, and lightly esteemed the Rock of his salvation.
- Jer 2:31 O generation, see ye the word of the LORD. Have I been a wilderness unto Israel? a land of darkness? wherefore say my people, We are lords; we will come no more unto thee?
- Ezekiel 16:14 And thy renown went forth among the heathen for thy beauty: for it *was* perfect through my comeliness, which I had put upon thee, saith the Lord GOD. 15 But thou didst trust in thine own beauty,

Pious individuals also recognized the danger:

- Agur in Prov 30:8,9, “feed me with food sufficient for me, lest I be full and deny thee, and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’”
- Job in 31:24-28, “If I have made gold my hope, or have said to the fine gold, *Thou art* my confidence; 25 If I rejoiced because my wealth *was* great, and because mine hand had gotten much; 26 If I beheld the sun when it shined, or the moon walking *in* brightness; 27 And my heart hath been secretly enticed, or my mouth hath kissed my hand: 28 This also *were* an iniquity *to be punished by* the judge: for I should have denied the God *that is* above.”

The temptation unfolds against this background. In each step, we have the temptation and Joseph's response, until the last, where he is absent.

7-9, Temptation can be Uninvited

7 she said, “Lie with me.”—Contrast this situation with that of Joseph's brothers in ch. 37. There, sin originated within them, in their bitterness toward Joseph. Here, temptation presents itself aggressively, from without. Potiphar's wife is in a position of control over Joseph. The very brevity of her invitation suggests her preemptory attitude toward him.

8 he refused and said—Joseph’s response highlights two dimensions of his responsibility, manward and godward.

Manward, he is very conscious of the trust that Potiphar has placed in him. This trust is manifested in three details:

- “my master wotteth not”—He does not micromanage Joseph, or seek to review the details of his work.
- “he hath committed all that he hath to my hand”—He does not reserve some areas for his own supervision. All is under Joseph.
- “9 *There is none greater in this house than I*”—He has placed the other servants under Joseph.

Joseph perceives very clearly the great responsibility that comes with such trust. The interesting thing is the divine dimension that he introduces: “how then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?” After emphasizing his master’s trust in him, we might expect that he would have described the sin that the woman suggests as being against Potiphar. But Joseph recognizes very clearly that the one most offended by sin is the one who has given the law that we have broken. Our sin may harm other people, but it offends God. Numerous examples in the Bible bear this out:

- Lev 6:2-7 describes various ways in which a man might betray a trust with a neighbor (such as lying, or abusing something entrusted to his care, or finding a lost object). Such actions are explicitly said to constitute a “trespass against the Lord” (v.2). The remedy is twofold: making reparation with a 20% penalty, and bringing a trespass offering to the Lord.
- In Num 32:20-23, RGM want to settle on the east bank of Jordan, in the area that is today the kingdom of Jordan. Moses points out that just as their brethren have helped them capture that land from Sihon and Og, so they owe their brethren support in the invasion of Canaan. If they do this, they will be “guiltless before the Lord, and before Israel” (22, note the order); if they do not, “behold, ye have sinned against the Lord” (23).
- David’s sin with Bathsheba not only violated Uriah’s rights in his wife, but also led to his murder, yet David confesses to Nathan, “I have sinned against the Lord” (2 Sam 12:13). When he captures this experience in his penitential Psalm, he puts the matter even more strikingly: “Against thee, thee only have I sinned,” Psa 51:4.
- The Prodigal Son in Luke 15 has squandered his father’s wealth and neglected his family duties. Yet when he returns home, he confesses, “I have sinned against heaven and in thy sight,” Luke 15:21. People only witness our sin. The real offense is against the lawgiver.
- 1 Cor 8:12 concludes Paul’s discussion of avoiding offense to a weaker brother by eating meat. “when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ.”

This principle is directly counter to modern ideas. Modern American morality is based purely on pragmatics: right and wrong are defined entirely horizontally, by their impact on other people. If something doesn’t hurt me or other people, it’s OK. This leads to the notion that the most heinous behavior is OK if it is done by “consulting adults in private.” But the consent that

matters most is God's. We live under his law, and if we offend against it, we are answerable to him.

10, *Temptation can be Persistent*

Again, we have her initiative, and Joseph's response.

Day by day.—This was not a one-time temptation. The adversary of our souls is persistent. He is compared with a roaring lion seeking his prey, 1 Pet 5:8. Gill: "This is the work he is continually employed in; he is always seeking to do mischief, either to the souls, or bodies, or estates of men."

He hearkened not.—Joseph's resistance had two aspects.

1. He resisted the specific temptation: "he hearkened not unto her, to lie by her." In this, he demonstrates James 4:7, "resist the devil, and he will flee from you."
2. He also followed Rom 13:14, "Make not provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof," by refusing "to be with her." He avoided her presence as much as possible. She apparently increased her calls for his service, and he found ways around them, sending other servants, etc., thus removing himself even from the vicinity of the temptation. A comparison of v.2 with v.11 suggests that he may even have removed his quarters from the main house so as to be less accessible to her.

11-12, *Temptation can be Aggressive*

Though he refused to lodge in the house, some of his duties required Joseph to enter the dwelling from time to time. On one such occasion, there happened to be no other servants present, and the wife attempted to take him forcibly. One suspects that she has arranged for them to be absent, to avoid interruption.

A weaker man might have yielded, protesting that he was forced. Joseph removes himself physically, leaving his garment in her hand.

The garment is apparently distinctive, for it serves to identify him to the master. It is apparently analogous to the garment his father gave him in ch. 37, indicating a role of oversight. Note the progress that Joseph has made.

- In ch. 37, he wore his garment proudly, even arrogantly.
- Here, he recognizes that his first duty is to the Lord, and he is willing to abandon his garment for the sake of godliness.

His conduct here reflects another NT exhortation: "Flee youthful lusts," 2 Tim 2:22. We should never underestimate the power of the flesh. The world would have us believe that we can enjoy the titillation of flirting with sin and still come out unscathed, but too often we are sucked in and succumb. We must flee temptation, even if we have to leave something of value.

13-18, *Temptation can be Dishonest*

Up to this point in the story, each scene involves both Joseph and Potiphar's wife. Now Joseph has disappeared from the stage. Potiphar's wife is at the center. First, she rehearses her story with the other men-servants, then delivers it to Potiphar.

14, the men of her house.—They were not in the house when this happened, and had to be summoned. Note how she develops her charge. It is not “Joseph tried to rape me,” but begins by recruiting their sympathy against the foreigner Joseph.

- She calls attention to his ethnicity: “he hath brought in an Hebrew.”
- She includes them with her as offended: “unto us,” “to mock us.”
- The charge of mockery suggests that the other servants had some resentment toward Joseph, just as his brothers did. They may have been lower-class Egyptians, resenting the fact that a foreigner is placed in a position of superiority over them.

Only then does she outline the charge of rape, including the claim that “I cried with a loud voice.”

Why does she complain to them at all? They have no authority to deal with Joseph. Probably, she is recruiting them to support her story. V.12 says nothing about her crying with a loud voice, and if she had, they would not have heard, for they were not in the house at the time. Thus if Potiphar asked them, they could not corroborate her story. Her words to them have two objectives.

- She is telling them **what** she wants them to report if asked.
- By slandering Joseph, she is telling them **why** they should support her story.

The importance of the cry is illustrated in Deut 22:23-27, which determines whether a woman is complicit in a rape based on whether she cried out or not. If the event happens in the city, her cry could be heard, and the lack of a cry condemns her, while if it happens in the country, she is given the benefit of the doubt and assumed to have cried out.

16, his lord came home.—With the servants prepared to back up her story, she is ready to make the accusation to her husband. She starts again with the ethnic slur, but adds a charge that it is all her husband’s fault: “which thou has brought unto us.” Thus she puts Potiphar on the defensive. He feels he must not only make correction for the wrong done to his wife, but also defend his own action in buying Joseph in the first place.

Joseph’s absence from this scene can be understood at two levels.

1. He is trying to stay as far away from Potiphar’s wife as possible. This will explain his absence from the initial accusation, but not the absence of any involvement in the subsequent inquiry.
2. Compare 1 Pet 2:19-23, on the silence of Christ and his example for us. Joseph exemplifies this. Certainly he will have maintained his innocence, but he does not revile or threaten. He is learning to trust patiently in the Lord.

19-23, Joseph in Prison

19-20, Sentenced

In the face of his wife’s accusation, the evidence of the garment, and the corroboration of the other servants, Potiphar has no choice but to condemn Joseph. He imprisons him in the royal jail, which (40:3) is on his estate and under his control.

Still, the punishment is milder than expected. Under later Hebrew law, an attempt at rape among free people was punishable by death (Deut 22), and a slave's fate would be even worse. KD cite Diodorus Siculus 1.78 on penalties in Egypt: attempted adultery was punishable by 1000 lashes, and rape on a free woman even more strongly. It appears that Potiphar is not fully persuaded of the facts as presented by his wife, and takes only such steps as are required to preserve his honor in the household. The expression "his wrath was kindled" is unusual. Typically, the object of wrath is expressed: "His wrath was kindled against X." Here it is ambiguous—Potiphar was upset, but perhaps as much against his wife as against Joseph.

21-23, Prosperity

he was there in the prison and the Lord was with Joseph.—compare the series of *wayehi* clauses in v.2.

This paragraph echoes the one with which the chapter began. In fact, the similarities draw our attention to a broader cycle that extends back to the beginning of ch. 37 and on to ch. 41. Each cycle marks Joseph's **promotion** by the person in control, followed by his **opposition** by others and his subsequent **humiliation**. The movement from the humiliation of one episode to the promotion of the next is accompanied by a **recognition** of the **Lord's presence** with him, not only from the narrator's perspective, but in the eyes of the person promoting Joseph.

- ch. 37 tells of his **promotion** by Jacob, marked by the coat; the **opposition** of his brothers motivated by jealousy, and his **humiliation** as they sell him into slavery.
- Ch. 39 records how as a slave the **Lord is with him**. Potiphar **recognizes** this and **promotes** Joseph to overseer of his house, followed by **opposition** by Potiphar's wife and **humiliation** in being cast into prison.
- Here we learn how in prison the jailor **recognizes** that the **Lord is with him**, leading to **promotion** by the jailor. The opposition and humiliation are less pronounced in this cycle, though the neglect by the butler and his continued languishing must have been a severe trial.
- When he finally stands before Pharaoh, Pharaoh's **recognition** that the **Lord is with him** leads to his final **promotion** to ruler of all Egypt.

The orderly pattern of this cycle contrasts with the turmoil we can imagine in Joseph's heart. He tries to do his best at each stage:

- obedience to his father
- diligence in Potiphar's house
- successful interpretation of dreams in prison.

From his perspective, this diligence is rewarded only by sinking to a lower level with each step. Yet in God's providence, each step brings him closer to his ultimate exaltation:

- slavery gets him to Egypt
- false accusation brings him into contact with the butler
- subsequent delay in prison until Pharaoh has his dream brings him to his final exaltation.

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“God works in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform” (Cowper). When we are most discouraged, we should rest in the Lord and our assurance of his love for us.

Notes

Scene Analysis in 38-39

The use of *wayyehi* is denser in ch. 38-39 than anywhere else in the Bible. Why is it used so much? It’s not just passage of time; even here, alternative mechanisms are used (38:12).

The expression seems to have dramatic force. It marks off a scene more strongly than a simple change of people, place, or time. Compare 27:30, where it marks Esau’s return from the hunt after Jacob’s deception of Isaac, or 29:10, 13, where it sets off the character’s response to what they have learned from the experience leading to it. It marks a significant event or realization on the part of a character.

In 38, *wayyehi* focuses our attention on Judah’s two wives and their offspring: BathShua (1ff), and Tamar (24ff). The rapid repetition of *wayyehi* in 27, 28, 29 forces us to slow down and pay attention to the birth of these sons. These are important people. We must not miss them. Their birth is marked physically by divine prodigy, and linguistically by the repetition of *wayyehi*.

Similarly, the rapid repetition of *wayyehi* in the temptation section of ch. 39 forces us to slow down and pay attention. We are being called to notice the distinctive aspects of the temptation that are highlighted in each of these scenes.

Ref	Marking	Summary	People	Place	Time
38:1-8	<i>wyhy</i>	Judah’s marriage & sons	Judah, Hirah, BathShua	Adullam	“at that time” (selling Joseph)
38:6-7	PN, time	Marriage & death of Er	Tamar, Er		Children grown
38:8-10	PN, characters	Marriage & death of Onan	Judah, Tamar, Onan		
38:11	PN, characters	Shelah withheld	Judah, Tamar		
38:12-19	Temporal clause, PN	Judah goes into Tamar	Judah, Tamar	Timnah	Much later
38:20-23	characters	Judah attempts to pay	Judah, Hirah		
38:24-26	<i>wyhy</i>	Tamar accused and vindicated	Judah, Tamar	Adullam?	+ 3 months
38:27	<i>wyhy</i>	Tamar has twins	Tamar		+ 6 months
38:28	<i>wyhy</i>	Firstborn marked			
38:29-30	<i>wyhy</i>	Secondborn named			
39:1-4	SV, PN,	Joseph’s arrival in	Joseph,	Egypt	Back at time of

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	place	Egypt and prosperity	Potiphar, Lord		38:1
39:5-6	<i>wyhy</i>	Judah's prosperity in Potiphar's house	Joseph, Potiphar, Lord		
39:7-9	<i>wyhy</i>	temptation	Joseph, P' wife	In the house	"after these things"
39:10	<i>wyhy</i>	Persistence and resistance			
39:11-12	<i>wyhy</i>	attack and flight			
39:13-18	<i>wyhy</i>	false accusation and condemnation	P's wife, servants, Potiphar		
39:19-23	<i>wyhy</i>	Joseph into prison	Potiphar, Joseph, keeper, Lord	Prison	

Broader Structure of Joseph Story

The narrative repeats cycles of several distinct themes:

- favor bestowed from an authority figure
- opposition
- humiliation

Divine Presence	Favor	Opposition	Humiliation
	37:3 Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he <i>was</i> the son of his old age: and he made him a coat of <i>many</i> colours.	37:8 And his brethren ... hated him yet the more for his dreams, and for his words.	37:28 they ... sold Joseph to the Ishmeelites for twenty <i>pieces</i> of silver:
39:2 And the LORD was with Joseph, and he was a prosperous man; and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian.	39:4 he made him overseer over his house, and all <i>that</i> he had he put into his hand.	39:17 And she spake unto him according to these words, saying, The Hebrew servant, which thou hast brought unto us, came in unto me to mock me:	39:20 And Joseph's master took him, and put him into the prison, a place where the king's prisoners <i>were</i> bound: and he was there in the prison.
39:21 But the LORD was with Joseph, and shewed him mercy, and gave him	39:22 And the keeper of the prison committed to Joseph's hand all the prisoners that <i>were</i> in the	40:23 Yet did not the chief butler remember Joseph, but forgot him.	<<Languishes in prison>> Psa 105:18,19.

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favour in the sight of the keeper of the prison.	prison; and whatsoever they did there, he was the doer <i>of it</i> .		
41:38 And Pharaoh said unto his servants, Can we find <i>such a one</i> as this <i>is</i> , a man in whom the Spirit of God <i>is</i> ?	41:39-40 And Pharaoh said unto Joseph, ...Thou shalt be over my house, and according unto thy word shall all my people be ruled: only in the throne will I be greater than thou.		