

Genesis 40 Butler and Baker

11/30/2003 7:15 AM

Overview

This section has two scenes: the first is in the prison in Potiphar's house, the second in Pharaoh's palace.

1-19, In the Prison

1-4, Incarceration of the Chief Butler and Chief Baker

the butler ... the chief of the butlers.—Apparently, the offenses were on the part of lower-level functionaries, but Pharaoh holds the top-level managers responsible and imprisons them. This suggests the status of the particular prison where Joseph was held. It was reserved for high-ranking prisoners. (But note v.5, using the simple titles for these same individuals.)

The Jewish sages suggest that they were implicated in an assassination plot.

3 he put them in ward.—Note the increasing precision with which their jail is designated:

- First, it is in Potiphar's house.
- Second, it is within the prison that is within that house.
- Third, we are reminded (and the Hebrew syntax emphasizes this) that it is the very same location where Joseph was held.

Thus we learn that Potiphar did not give Joseph over to some outside authority, but retained him under his own control, suggesting further that he was suspicious of the circumstances of Joseph's accusation.

4 the captain of the guard charged Joseph.—“The captain of the guard” is Potiphar's title (37:36; 39:1). Unless Joseph has been incarcerated long enough for Potiphar to retire and be replaced, this is Potiphar still recognizing Joseph's talents.

and he served them.—Even in prison, the difference in rank between them and the slave Joseph is reflected. He is made responsible for tending to them.

5-19, Their Dreams

5-8, Dreamed

5 they dreamed.—No doubt they dreamed often, but these dreams were distinctive.

- They happened in the same night.
- “each man acc. to the interpretation” has the meaning, “each dream with its own particular meaning.” This clause is apparently explained by the following repetition of their titles, “the butler and the baker.” That is, the dreams were correlated with their palace responsibilities.
- Both dreams use the number “three.”

6 they were sad.—No doubt they told one another of their dreams, and were struck by the coincidences. These coincidences suggested to them that the dreams were not ordinary, but had special significance. Joseph himself later tells Pharaoh that a doubled dream is evidence of its divine origin (41:32, “for that the dream was doubled unto Pharaoh twice; *it is* because the thing *is* established by God, and God will shortly bring it to pass”; cf. Job 33:14-18). In fact, doubled dreams are typical of Joseph’s history (here; in ch. 41; the two dreams of Joseph’s dominance in ch. 37), and Joseph may have learned this significance from these previous dreams.

8, no interpreter.—Their sadness is the result of their conviction that the dreams have significance that is inaccessible to them. The Egyptians were preoccupied with dreams. The most dramatic illustration of this is Chester Beatty Papyrus 3, found at Deir el-Medina. The mss itself dates to 1275 BC, but the editor finds reason to believe that the material comes from the end of the 12th dynasty, 1800 or 1900, which is the same epoch that Joseph was in Egypt. The scroll was the property of the scribe Kenhirkhopeshef or Kenherkhepeshef, and includes interpretations of segments of dreams:

If a male dreamer sees himself dead, then he'll live a long life.

If he sees himself in a mirror, he'll soon be forced to start a new life.

If he sees himself eating crocodile flesh, he'll become a village official.

And if he sees himself putting his face to the ground, then the dead want something.

If a man sees himself in a dream, looking out of a window, good, it means the hearing of his cry by his god.

If a man sees himself in a dream, drinking a warm beer, bad, it means suffering will come upon him

Portions of this document are in ANET p. 495.

See http://www.cmts.org/pdfs/prog_res_sg_jos.pdf ;

<http://www.sas.ac.uk/warburg/mnemosyne/captions/egyptr.htm> . See also context in

<http://www.touregypt.net/featurestories/medina.htm> .

In the court, the butler and baker would have had access to trained interpreters who could explain their dreams to them, the same cadre on whom Pharaoh will call in 41:8. Here in the prison, they do not have such access. They would not be sad over random dreams, but when they believe that God is trying to speak with them and they cannot understand, they are distressed.

This hunger is a natural appetite that the Lord has put in the human heart. Prov 25:2, “It is the glory of God to conceal a thing: but the honour of kings is to search out a matter.”

Joseph said.—Joseph draws their attention to the divine implications of what they have experienced. We have seen before that both Potiphar and the jailor attributed his success to the Lord, which implies that he has been in the habit of giving glory to the Lord for his prosperity. Here we see this witness in action. Joseph demonstrates what it means to be ready always to give an answer to every man a reason of the hope that is in us (1 Pet 3:15).

9-15, *The Butler*

9, In my dream.—The butler’s dream has two parts, each introduced by a verbless clause.

- 9-10, he sees the vine before him. The following clauses describe its accelerated growth: the buds form, blossoms open, and clusters boil with ripe grapes. It's like the accelerated videos produced by taking one frame every hour that appear in some of the old Moody Science films.
- 11, he sees Pharaoh's cup in his hand. He presses the grapes and serves Pharaoh.

12, Joseph said.—Joseph's response has two parts.

- 12-13, he interprets the dream, predicting the Butler's restoration to his former post in three days. Note the expression "lift up thine head," which here refers to exaltation. Having the head hang down reflects discouragement and despair (Job 10:15), hiding so that the oppressor will not notice you (Zech 1:21); lifting up the head is a sign of encouragement and promotion. Cf. 2 Kings 25:27, where it describes how Evilmerodach king of Babylon promoted Jehoiachin out of prison and made him a member of his court.
- 14-15, he asks the butler to remember him when this happens.
 - "Show kindness" is literally, *do xesed*," using the word for steadfast covenant love. Joseph's request shows something of the nature of *xesed*. Joseph has served the butler during the entire time he has been in prison, and now has provided him the interpretation of his dream. On the basis of this existing relationship he asks the butler to do something for him. This is the nature of *xesed*—not just abstract kindness, but kindness predicated on a previous relationship.
 - His plea is motivated by the injustice of the punishment he is suffering. Here is the only complaint we hear from him during his humiliation, reflecting the two abuses he has experienced: his removal from Canaan, and his imprisonment. He does not rail at others or blame them, but simply asserts his own innocence.

16-19, *The Baker*

16 When the chief baker saw that the interpretation was good.—Note that he is responding, not to the fact that Joseph can interpret dreams, but that the interpretation was good. Calvin:

He does not care respecting the skill and fidelity of Joseph as an interpreter; but because Joseph had brought good and useful tidings to his companion, he also desires an interpretation, which he hopes will prove according to his mind. So, many, with ardor and alacrity, desire the word of God, not because they simply wish to be governed by the Lord, and to know what is right, but because they dream of mere enjoyment. When, however, the doctrine does not correspond with their wishes, they depart sorrowful and wounded.

The scriptures bear ample testimony to this aspect of our sinful nature.

- Many are like Ahab, who said to Jehoshaphat of Micaiah the son of Imlah (1 Kings 22:8), "I hate him; for he doth not prophesy good concerning me, but evil."
- Isa 30:9-11, "this *is* a rebellious people, lying children, children *that* will not hear the law of the LORD: 10 Which say to the seers, See not; and to the prophets, Prophecy not unto us right things, speak unto us smooth things, prophesy deceits: 11 Get you out of the way, turn aside out of the path, cause the Holy One of Israel to cease from before us.

- Ezekiel 13:7-11 Have ye not seen a vain vision, and have ye not spoken a lying divination, whereas ye say, The LORD saith it; albeit I have not spoken? 8 Therefore thus saith the Lord GOD; Because ye have spoken vanity, and seen lies, therefore, behold, I am against you, saith the Lord GOD. 9 And mine hand shall be upon the prophets that see vanity, and that divine lies: they shall not be in the assembly of my people, neither shall they be written in the writing of the house of Israel, neither shall they enter into the land of Israel; and ye shall know that I am the Lord GOD. 10 Because, even because they have seduced my people, saying, Peace; and there was no peace; and one built up a wall, and, lo, others daubed it with untempered mortar: Say unto them which daub it with untempered mortar, that it shall fall: there shall be an overflowing shower; and ye, O great hailstones, shall fall; and a stormy wind shall rend it.
- John 7:7 The world cannot hate you; but me it hateth, because I testify of it, that the works thereof are evil.

The baker wants the interpretation only if it is good. The butler wants to hear what God has to say to him, regardless. This distinction between attitudes to the word of God is crucial, and we do well to examine our hearts to determine whether we are like the butler or like the baker.

he said unto Joseph.—Like the butler, the baker has had a dream that involves the number “three” and recalls his office in Pharaoh’s court. “All manner of bakemeats” reflects the Egyptians’ preoccupation with grain and grain products. The Egyptian dictionary lists 38 kinds of cake and 57 varieties of bread (see Wenham).

Joseph answered.—Joseph’s response begins identically with that to the butler, except that he replaces “branches” with “baskets.” They continue to be word-for-word identical through the phrase, “shall Pharaoh lift up thy head.” The baker’s heart is soaring as he hears the interpretation unfold...but Joseph does not go on to the promise of restoration. Instead, he adds to the clause “lift up thy head”, the prepositional phrase, “from off thee.” With this extension, the expression is no longer an idiom for exalting someone, but a somber prediction of execution. The baker will be executed.

Joseph might have been tempted to give the baker a good interpretation. It would have been so easy—and how could it have hurt? The baker would be unable to harm him after he died, and the butler would remain his friend. But he is a faithful minister of the word of God, presenting God’s warnings as well as his promises. It is well for the baker to know his coming fate, that he might have opportunity to inquire concerning the God who alone can bring salvation. There is no evidence that he ever did so, but Joseph at least was a faithful watchman, warning of coming judgment even though it no doubt brought him the disfavor of the baker.

Joseph does *not* ask the baker to “remember him,” as he did the butler. The baker will be in no position to deliver him from prison.

20-23, In the Palace

All happened according to the interpretation that Joseph gave. “Yet did not the chief butler remember Joseph, but forgot him.” Here is the final round of opposition:

- not the outright antagonism of his brothers,
- nor the reflex to unrequited lust of Potiphar’s wife,

- but simple carelessness on the part of the butler.

For all that it was the least deliberate of the oppositions that he experienced, it may have been the most painful. Sometimes we can understand if people reject us because we speak to them the word of God (the dreams he related to his brothers) or refuse to join them in sin (Potiphar's wife). At least then we can comfort ourselves that we are suffering for the Lord. But when they just forget us, treating us as irrelevant, it is difficult to see the hand of God in it.

The time after the release of the butler and baker is in view in the summary of Joseph's experience in Psalm 105:18, "Whose feet they hurt with fetters: he was laid in iron: 19 Until the time that his word came: the word of the LORD tried him."

- "The word of the Lord tried him": the prophecies given to him long ago in Canaan, that his brethren should bow down to him, must seem very far away and foreign now. He must be sorely tempted to reject this revelation. So God's promises may test us when our circumstances are poor.
- "His word came," that is, was fulfilled (cf. usage in Judg 13:12,17). God has not forgotten Joseph; the promises of his boyhood will be fulfilled.

God has a particular time to draw Pharaoh's attention to Joseph: not when Pharaoh is flush with wine at his birthday party, but when he is terrified by the dream of coming famine. God will deal with Pharaoh in recognition of the truth of Isaiah 26:9-10:

When thy judgments *are* in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness. 10
Let favour be shewed to the wicked, *yet* will he not learn righteousness: in the land of
uprightness will he deal unjustly, and will not behold the majesty of the LORD.

Joseph must be kept in prison until the time for his next mission. Pharaoh must be confronted with the spectacle of a humble foreign prisoner outperforming his professional dream interpreters. For this purpose, Joseph must suffer for two more years, to satisfy God's broader purposes.