

Genesis 41 Joseph Before Pharaoh

12/8/2003 6:40 AM

Overview

1-7, Pharaoh's Dream

Two full years.—God left Joseph in prison for two more years before he was ready to present him to Pharaoh. He is in no rush to accomplish his purposes.

Pharaoh dreamed.—The dreams are straightforward but would certainly seize Pharaoh's attention.

- They both start with recognizable features of Egyptian life:
 - “The river,” the Nile, the lifeline of this otherwise desert land
 - Cattle grazing along the river
 - Grain growing in the fields of silt deposited by the floods each year
- But these familiar scenes are disrupted in incredible ways.
 - Cows are not carnivorous. What does it mean for one cow to eat another?
 - Grain doesn't eat anything, in the conventional sense. How can one ear of wheat eat another?
- The repetition of the scene after a waking period makes it impossible for Pharaoh to shake off the vision.

8-36, Seeking an Interpretation

8, Failure of the Magicians of Egypt

his spirit was troubled.—Every time this verb is used, it refers to a divinely-instigated disturbance. The Nifal in particular is used of nocturnal interventions (here, Psa 77:5, Dan 2:3).

all the magicians ... all the wise men.—We have seen that oneiromancy (divination by the interpretation of dreams) was a well-developed art in Egypt, entrusted to highly trained people. Pharaoh thus summons these to explain his dream.

there was none that could interpret them.—The expression is exactly the same as in 40:8. In the presence of a dream from God, the magicians of Egypt are powerless. This is really remarkable. The elements of the dreams were common symbols of Egyptian fruitfulness: the Nile, cattle, grain. Certainly any oneiromancer worth his salt could spin a story out of these, or even guess that the dream must concern plenty and famine, prosperity and want. Calvin:

We know what an inflated and impudent race of men these soothsayers were, and how extravagantly they boasted. How did it then happen that they gave the king no answer, seeing they might have trifled in any way whatever with a credulous man, who willingly suffered himself to be deluded? ... The Lord so strikes dumb the wicked workers of deceit, that they cannot even find a specious explanation of the dreams.

Recall that at the time of the Exodus, God again frustrates the magicians of Egypt. These two episodes stand like bookends around the sojourn in Egypt. God brings his people into Egypt with a public display of his superiority over the gods of Egypt and their functionaries, and when they leave, God again demonstrates that he alone is the true God.

9-13, Testimony of the Chief Butler

my faults.—The same root as “offended” in 40:1. Probably the reference is to his offense (real or presumed) against the king. He must refer to his imprisonment in order to tell Joseph’s story, and he begins obsequiously by acknowledging the king’s righteousness and his unworthiness. Contrast this attitude with the sincere, unhypocritical attitude of Joseph.

12 a young man, an Hebrew, servant to the captain of the guard.—Each phrase is mildly condescending:

- “a young man,” unlike the older, wiser courtiers with whom the king was surrounded;
- “an Hebrew,” a foreigner, not a native-born Egyptian;
- “servant to ...,” at a lower level of the palace hierarchy, unlike the butler, who was servant to Pharaoh himself (v.10).

These disparaging terms are probably meant to excuse his not mentioning this individual earlier. “O king, there was this rather inconsequential fellow in jail with us ... but you know, he could interpret dreams.”

13 me he restored ... him he hanged.—Who is the antecedent of “he”? Grammatically, Joseph. So vivid was the effect of Joseph’s prophecy that the butler almost feels that it caused the subsequent events, rather than being caused by them.

- In the butler’s mind, this is a figure of speech. Joseph is described as causing what in fact he only describes. Metonymy of the subject, Bullinger pl 569.
- But this is in fact how God’s prophecy works; his word is effective, Gen 1, Isa 55:11.

14-36, Joseph Interprets the Dream

14, Joseph Brought from Prison

As in 1 Sam 21:8, the king’s business requires haste. Nevertheless, that haste is tempered with the need to make Joseph presentable in the royal court, so he is shaved and dressed in a noble garment before his presentation. How much more ought we to give attention to how we appear before the Lord of the universe?

15-24, Presentation of the Dream

15 Pharaoh said.—He summarizes the chapter thus far in three clauses:

- I have dreamed a dream: this covers 1-7.
- No interpreter: this is 8.
- Joseph’s reputation: 9-13.

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Joseph's reputation is stated unusually: "you hear a dream to interpret it." We might say, "For you, to hear a dream is to interpret it."

16 Joseph answered.—Joseph is once again in a position to exalt himself, but humbled by his experiences over the last 13 years, he continues to give God the glory.

Answer of peace.—Lit., "God will answer the peace of Pharaoh." He knows that Pharaoh is distraught and upset, first at the unnatural dream, then at the failure of the magicians to interpret. God will show that he can bring calm to the perplexity of human experience.

17-24 In my dream.—Pharaoh's account of his dream is almost word for word the same as the original description, but with a bit of interpretation in the retelling.

- "form" for "appearance" in 18, 19 suggests a reification in Pharaoh's mind; they not only looked bad, they *were* bad.
- He adds the comment in v.21 that the eating did nothing for the appearance of the cattle.
- There is no counterpart to 7b. On reflection, Pharaoh realizes that this is more than just a dream.

41:1-7	41:17-24
Pharaoh dreamed: and, behold, he stood by the river.	In my dream, behold, I stood upon the bank of the river:
2 And, behold, there came up out of the river seven well favoured kine <fair of appearance> and fattleshed; and they fed in a meadow.	18 And, behold, there came up out of the river seven kine, fattleshed and well favoured; <fair of form> and they fed in a meadow:
3 And, behold, seven other kine came up after them out of the river , ill favoured <<evil of appearance>> and leanfleshed;	19 And, behold, seven other kine came up after them, poor and very ill favoured <<evil of form>> and leanfleshed, such as I never saw in all the land of Egypt for badness:
and stood by the <i>other</i> kine upon the brink of the river.	
4 And the ill favoured and leanfleshed kine did eat up the seven well favoured and fat kine.	20 And the lean and the ill favoured kine did eat up the first seven fat kine: 21 And when they had eaten them up, it could not be known that they had eaten them; but they were still ill favoured, as at the beginning.
So Pharaoh awoke. 5 And he slept and dreamed the second time: and, behold, seven ears of corn came up upon one stalk, rank <<same word as cows>> and good.	So I awoke. 22 And I saw in my dream, and, behold, seven ears came up in one stalk, full and good:
6 And, behold, seven thin ears and blasted with the east wind sprung up after them.	23 And, behold, seven ears, withered, thin, <i>and</i> blasted with the east wind, sprung up after them:
7 And the seven thin ears devoured the seven rank and full ears.	24 And the thin ears devoured the seven good ears:
And Pharaoh awoke, and, behold, <i>it was</i> a dream.	
8 Pharaoh told them his dream; but <i>there was</i> none that could interpret < <i>poter</i> > them unto Pharaoh.	and I told <i>this</i> unto the magicians; but <i>there was</i> none that could declare < <i>maggid</i> > <i>it</i> to me.

25-36, Joseph's Interpretation and Recommendation

25-32, Interpretation

Joseph's interpretation is framed by the three-fold repetition of his assertion that God has revealed what he is about to do: 25, 28, 32. This frame makes an important point. God's revelation of the future is not a passive declaration of what will happen anyway, but an active statement of his sovereign will and intent.

Calvin: "God does not indolently contemplate the fortuitous issue of things, but ... determines, at his own will, what shall happen. ... he does not give a response from the tables of fate, but declares that whatever shall happen will be his own work ... unless we would cast God down from his throne, we must leave to him his power of action, as well as his foreknowledge."

Set off by this frame, the interpretation has two parts.

1. 26-27 give the elements: cattle and ears are years; thin things represent famine.
2. 29-31 flesh out the story: there will be seven years of plenty, followed by seven years of famine.

33-36, Recommendation

Joseph does not stop with a prediction, but offers counsel on how to deal with the problem. We see here the talent for stewardship that had made him so valuable to Potiphar. His scheme includes

- a single point of responsibility, "a man discreet and wise" (v. 33). These two characteristics complement one another.
 - "discrete" indicates discernment, an ability to see beyond the facts and understand the inner dynamics of a situation.
 - "wise" in the Bible is always practical, indicating the ability to apply knowledge to action.
 - Discretion without wisdom would lead to a smart, ineffective manager, while wisdom without discretion might lead to action on false bases. The two complement one another perfectly.
- Subordinate managers, "'officers over the land" (v. 34),
- A double tithe during the years of plenty ("the fifth part," v.34)
- Distributed storage to facilitate distribution later (v.35)

There is a lesson here for us, that a bald warning is not nearly so useful as one that is accompanied with a recommendation for addressing the problem.

37-57, Acting on the Revelation

37-45, Pharaoh Promotes Joseph

v. 37 shows that the initial response to Joseph's suggestion was positive, not only by Pharaoh, but also "in the eyes of all his servants." Matthew Henry observes that "each [was] hoping for the place." But Pharaoh quickly stifles their ambition by appointing Joseph.

The appointment narrative consists of six successive actions by Pharaoh. His title is repeated with each one of them, slowing down the action and marking this as the high point of the story.

- Two actions declare Pharaoh's intention.
- Two actions invest Joseph with authority.
- Two actions establish his position in the Egyptian nobility.

38-40, Intention

Pharaoh responds first to his servants, then to Joseph. In both answers, like Potiphar and the keeper of the prison before him, he recognizes that Joseph's abilities are a divine endowment.

38, unto his servants.—He answers their enthusiasm for Joseph's suggestion with a question, deftly squelching their own ambitions. If the court magicians could not interpret the dream and warn of the impending threat, why should he trust them to implement the remedy?

39-40, unto Joseph.—Joseph's words give evidence that he is the man Pharaoh needs. Pharaoh recognizes that God has showed Joseph "all this"—not only the interpretation of the dream, but also the recommended course of action. The interpretation shows that he is discrete (discerning), while the recommendation shows that he is wise. Accordingly, he declares his intention (future tenses) to make Joseph his steward, chief counselor, and second in command.

41-43, Investiture

The perfect tense in v.41 should be understood as a performative: "I hereby set thee over ...". These words initiate the investiture ceremony of which the subsequent actions are a part. Waltke compares the investiture of Pharaoh Necho by Ashurbanipal about 650 BC (ANET 295), which includes ceremonial garments, a golden chain and rings, and royal transportation.

How suddenly Joseph's situation is reversed! He must wait patiently for God to act, but when God does act, the effect is unmistakable. Matthew Henry: "he that, in the morning, was dragging his fetters of iron, before night was adorned with a chain of gold."

44-45, Installation in the Nobility

In spite of the impressive symbols given to him, some of the nobility might despise Joseph as a foreigner. Thus as the third step in his promotion, Pharaoh joins him to the nobility.

- In 44, Pharaoh designates his position in the court hierarchy: he does not replace Pharaoh, but everyone else is subject to him.
- In 45, he is given an Egyptian name and married to a princess.

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- The meaning of Joseph's name is disputed. One suggestion is "the god speaks and he lives," another "he who is called Ip-ankh." The meaning is not as important as the fact that, like Daniel and his friends, Joseph is given a name that will not sound foreign.
- On was the center of the worship of the sun god Ra, one of the three most powerful priestly groups in Egypt (the other two being Amun and Ptah). Potiphar may have been high priest of Ra; his name means "He whom Ra has given." This marriage makes Joseph a relative of one of the most important families in Egypt.

45b-46b is a transition. The first part looks forward to 46b, while the second part looks back to the previous section, Joseph's promotion. 46 is also crucial for understanding the chronology. Compare 37:2; Joseph was 17 when the difficulties with his brothers erupted. Thus he has been in exile for about 13 years.

46-52, The Seven Years of Plenty

We read first of Joseph's official actions, then of his family matters.

46-49, Official Actions

Note the methodical approach he took to preparing for the famine.

46 Joseph went out ...and went throughout.—He was no "stay-at-home" administrator. He could have remained in the palace, but he insists on first-hand knowledge of what is going on, obtained by touring the land himself.

47-48 Gathering and storage.—Note that each city's food is laid up in that city, from the produce of that city. He instituted a distributed system of managing the resources, to motivate local involvement and facilitate the eventual distribution.

49 he left numbering.—This seems like an uncharacteristic administrative failing. Two mitigating thoughts:

- It may be taken as a sign of the extreme plenty that the harvest overwhelmed Joseph's bookkeeping preparations. Even he had not anticipated that the bounty would be as great as it was.
- The association with "the sand of the sea" calls to mind the promise to Jacob in 32:12 concerning his offspring. The next paragraph goes on to discuss Joseph's offspring in Egypt. We are being reminded of the magnitude of God's promises to the patriarchs concerning their spiritual seed.
- *Can't take this as impersonal, as many versions do—this particular verb is never used that way.*

50-52, Family Growth

Joseph reflects his trust in God in the names he gives to his sons.

51, Manasseh ... forget.—Some chastise Joseph for being negligent of his home. See Waltke for a citation from the *Midrash Tanxuma* criticizing him for eating and drinking in palatial comfort while his father languishes in sackcloth; thus also Calvin: "the oblivion of his father

house ... can scarcely be altogether excused.” Calvin takes this as a reminder of the strength of the flesh to lead us astray.

But it seems preferable, with Waltke, to take this as a figure of speech known as a hendiadys, “one through two,” in which two words refer to the same thing, as though one were a modifier of the other. So here Joseph has not forgotten two things, but only one: his toil (trouble, care, anxiety) that he experience while in his father’s house, due to his brothers’ cruelty.

52, Ephraim ... fruitful.—The name is a pun on the phrase, “God hath caused me to be fruitful,” *hiphrani*, and may come from a noun meaning “fruitful land.”

53-57, The Seven Years of Famine

The progress of the famine is marked by three-fold reference to its extent beyond the land of Egypt.

53-54, Initial Phase.—The extreme plenteousness was only in Egypt, but the dearth was in all lands. At first, “in all the land of Egypt there was bread,” because the exceptional bounty left the population with surplus.

55-56a, The pinch begins.—Eventually, private stores were exhausted, and when people turned to the government, they were directed to Joseph.

56b-57, Sale of grain.—Joseph then opened the stores he had prepared, and sold grain to the people. News that food was available in Egypt spread to other lands, and they too came to buy grain.

- Note Joseph’s use of economic mechanisms to distribute the grain. He did not hand it out in a dole, but sold it.
- “storehouses” = *Heb.* “those which had something in them.” See *Clines, Aleph p. 430, 3e for this construction.*

The repeated reference to other lands sets us up for the next chapter, which explains the coming of Joseph’s brothers to buy grain. The famine is the link that draws Joseph back to his family in Canaan.