

Joseph Humiliated and Elevated in Egypt

Genesis 39-41

Joseph in Potiphar's House

1. We have now come to the engrossing narrative of Joseph in Egypt, which forms one unified story. It is fairly simple to read, and therefore I will limit myself to a short overview, clarifying only where necessary.

As we saw at the conclusion of the last outline, Joseph entered the house of Potiphar, courtier and captain of Pharaoh's bodyguard. We are not told Pharaoh's name—the word “pharaoh” was really a title meaning “the great house,” used much in the same way as we speak of the “White House” and the “Holy See” to describe the authority of president and pope, respectively. Potiphar is called “an Egyptian”; that is, one of the Egyptian people, a seemingly obvious truth, but one which is used in Scripture to denote someone who belongs to the people which is possessed by the spirit of oppression of the church-seed.

Emphatically, it is stated that the LORD was with Joseph in everything. He did not become a field-hand, but a house-slave, afterwards a personal slave and overseer, and finally even an independent administrator, so that Potiphar left all things in his charge except the pagan ritual of food-preparation. This little bit of information indicates that Joseph adapted himself in all matters, excluding religion. The LORD's blessing, moreover, extended itself to all of Potiphar's household.

However, because of the false accusation of rape made by Potiphar's wicked wife, Joseph was thrown, without proper investigation, into the state prison, a dungeon (40:15), his feet in fetters, his neck in a collar of iron (Psalm 105:18), as if he were a dangerous criminal.

Later a turn for the better occurred. The commander gave him a position of trust over all the prisoners, for the LORD was with him; and whatever he did, the LORD made to prosper.

2. Joseph even gained the confidence of the captain of the guard, who can have been no other than Potiphar. Potiphar lived in or near the establishment which contained the prison (40:3). When Pharaoh's butler and baker, for an unspecified reason, were incarcerated in the state prison, Potiphar himself appointed Joseph to serve these two, important officials.

On a certain morning they were very depressed; when asked, they told Joseph that they had both had a dream, which they, superstitiously, believed was a forecast of their future—but in the prison there was, of course, no interpreter to consult. Joseph, however, referred them to God, Who alone can do that. Then he asked them to tell him their dreams. So it happened. The butler had seen branches on a vine that budded, blossomed, and brought forth clusters, which he had pressed out into Pharaoh's cup, giving it to him. Joseph's interpretation was that within three days the butler would be restored to his office and lifted out of his humiliation. He added the fervent request that the butler remember him by mentioning him favourably to Pharaoh. The baker, however, who had dreamed of three baskets of cakes balanced on his head, from the top of which birds ate, heard that within three days he would be hanged, and that the birds would eat his flesh. And this happened: on Pharaoh's birthday, three days later, Pharaoh showed mercy to the butler, but executed the baker. The butler, however, forgot Joseph.

3. There is clearly one line running through these events. This is not a series of coincidences, but a proclamation of God's providence. History's Maker brought Joseph from the dungeon to Pharaoh's palace in such a wondrous way.

This period of humiliation was a test of Joseph's faith, during which he remained steadfast, not even attempting to escape, but waiting for God's time—the time when his interpretations became reality (see Psalm 105:16-19).

Joseph at the Court

Two full years later, Pharaoh dreamed of seven fat cows and of seven thin ones that devoured them. Going to sleep again, Pharaoh had another dream: seven plump and good ears sprouting from one stalk, and seven thin and withered ears that devoured the others.

All the wise men of Egypt, called together, could not explain the dreams. It was then that the butler remembered that Joseph had given accurate interpretations of dreams in prison.

Of course, Pharaoh summoned Joseph. “When you hear a dream, you can interpret it,” he said. Strikingly, Joseph again gave God the honour: “It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favourable answer.” When Pharaoh had extensively related his dreams, Joseph declared that the dreams were one in meaning. God had shown Pharaoh what He was about to do. Seven years of great plenty would come, but after them, seven years of famine, in which the plenty would be consumed.

But at the same time, Joseph advised Pharaoh to appoint a wise man and overseers over the land, who would lay up a fifth part of the produce in storage sheds. That wise man, in the eyes of Pharaoh and of his servants, could only be Joseph, who was subsequently appointed over the whole land. He was given royal jewellery and was driven about in Pharaoh’s second chariot, before which runners went, calling: “Abrek!” that is: “Beware!” or, “Reverence!” (see Psalm 105:20-22). He was also given an Egyptian name: *Zaphenath-paneah*, which probably means “saviour of life.” He was given *Asenath* (“belonging to the god[dess] Noeth) to wife; she was a daughter of *Potiphera* (“gift of Ra,” the sun-god), someone of the priestly family of On, or Heliopolis, north of Memphis, a city on the east of the Nile. In this way, Joseph became part of a really heathen environment, but the LORD Who led him, knew how to keep him in the faith of his people. Then he went to see the land of Egypt, in view of his task.

Joseph was thirty years old when he became viceroy. At nineteen, he had come to Potiphar, which means that the period of his humiliation had lasted about eleven years.

Going around Egypt, in order to regulate his work, Joseph gathered the great surplus (the fifth part), and stored it up. There was so much that measuring became impossible.

Before the famine, he had two sons: *Manasseh* (“God has made me forget all my hardships and my father’s house”—meaning that the division no longer troubled him), and *Ephraim* (“God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction”).

When the seven years had passed, famine struck, also in the surrounding countries. This will not mean that absolutely nothing grew, but, as far as Egypt was concerned, we may assume that the Nile, which brought fertility by the extensive flooding of the fields, no longer rose. Then the people bought from the reserves to supplement their produce. Also from other countries people came to buy grain.

Questions

1. (40:4) Why would Potiphar not have released Joseph?
2. (40:23) How is it possible that the butler forgot Joseph? Could this have been deliberate, as Calvin suggests? If so, what may have been the reason?
3. (41:25) Why two dreams?
4. (41:57) Was the famine a judgment over church and world? If so, what further purpose was there in relation to Jacob’s house?
5. Why would Joseph not have sought contact with his father’s house?