

Genesis 41:37-57
Joseph and Pharaoh, part 2

Joseph continued to waste away in prison for two years after he had prophetically interpreted the dreams of the cupbearer and baker. Perhaps, he had expected that within that first week that the cupbearer would take the opportunity to tell Pharaoh of his unjust imprisonment and maybe even recount the events that had caused Joseph to be in Egypt as a slave. Then Pharaoh, no doubt in a good mood enjoying the celebration being held in his honor, would graciously take the steps necessary to bring Joseph out of prison. Did Joseph expect to be returned to his owner Potiphar and resume his duties as his slave, under the ever watchful eye of Potiphar's wife? That seemed unlikely. Did he expect to be sent back to Canaan? That prospect must have seemed equally disheartening. We do not know what Joseph hoped for as he languished in prison, but it was clear that if he expected to be freed, he soon began to realize that it was not to be. The cupbearer had forgotten him.

But then Pharaoh had a dream. Two dreams, in fact, each as disturbing as the other. Cows had cannibalized one another and ears of grain had swallowed one another entirely. What message were the gods sending to Pharaoh? He gathered all his magicians and wise counselors, but none could persuade Pharaoh that he had the correct interpretation. Pharaoh recounted his dreams to each one, but none possessed any insight. As Pharaoh's mood worsened, the cupbearer attended to him trying to soothe his fraying nerves with wine. Then the cupbearer remembered his own experiences in the prison. He recalled the Hebrew there who correctly interpreted both his dream and that of the baker. He saw the opportunity to impress Pharaoh and provide the answer he was looking for, so he told Pharaoh about Joseph.

Pharaoh immediately had Joseph brought from his cell, and when he had bathed, shaved, and put on clean clothes, Joseph entered Pharaoh's audience chamber. Pharaoh told Joseph of his dreams and Joseph, claiming no ability for himself but giving all glory to his God, interpreted the dreams for Pharaoh. Egypt was about to experience seven years of plenty. Crops would grow abundantly in the land, and there would be surpluses of food. But then, there would be seven years of famine. Famine so severe that all of the abundance would be forgotten and the years of plenty would seem as if they had never happened.

Pharaoh must have been astonished, but as he pondered his situation, Joseph boldly offered a solution. Disaster could be averted if, as Joseph suggested, Pharaoh empowered and equipped a wise and discerning man who would have both the authority and the personnel to gather the excess grain during the seven years of abundance and store it safely in warehouses where it could be protected. Then, when the famine struck, the grain could be supplied to the people from strategic cities where it had been preserved. Pharaoh needed very little time to consider, for "the proposal seemed good to Pharaoh and to all his servants" (Genesis 41:37). The language suggests that Pharaoh was more impressed with Joseph's counsel than with his dream interpretation. Pharaoh made no comment about the dreams, but did approve of Joseph's plan to reorganize the Egyptian bureaucracy.

From Prisoner to Prime Minister

As each of his ministers concurred, no doubt reluctantly, that Joseph's plan was a good one, Pharaoh pondered his options. Certainly he had advisors and wise men surrounding him. To be an advisor to Pharaoh would have been the fondest ambition of any well educated man of high social status in Egypt. Yet as he gazed around his audience chamber, certainly recalling the recent failure of any of these men to properly interpret his dreams, Pharaoh reached a decision. Acknowledging Joseph,

“³⁸Pharaoh said to his servants, ‘can we find a man like this, in whom there is a divine spirit?’ ³⁹So Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘since God has informed you of all this, there is no one as discerning and wise as you are. ⁴⁰You shall be in charge of my house, and all my people shall be obedient to you; only regarding the throne will I be greater than you’” (v. 38-40).

Pharaoh had listened closely when Joseph had spoken, and perhaps intentionally used the same phrase to describe Joseph, “discerning and wise,” as Joseph had used in describing the qualities of the man Pharaoh should appoint. Perhaps, also, Pharaoh believed that since the Hebrew God had revealed to Joseph the correct interpretation of his dreams, this plan for Egypt's survival must have come from the same source. In any case, whether it was Joseph or Joseph's God, Pharaoh was convinced that he was the only man in all of Egypt to administer the program.

As was the case with Potiphar, Joseph was placed in “charge of my house” (v. 40). This was the third house for Joseph in Egypt. He had been in Potiphar's house, the jail house, and now Pharaoh's house. In the first two situations, he had started at the bottom and been blessed by God as he performed his duties. So much so that both Potiphar and the jailer recognized God's hand upon him. Because God blessed Joseph, and blessed what Joseph did, Potiphar prospered and the prison ran smoothly. We cannot know what details Pharaoh knew of all this, but it is clear that he believed that Joseph was the right man for the job.

The official title of such a man in Egypt was the vizier. This was the man who headed the administrative bureaucracy and carried out the wishes of Pharaoh. A modern equivalent might be a prime minister, though, of course, the vizier in ancient Egypt was appointed, not elected. In Egypt, the vizier oversaw the land and judicial matters. He was specifically responsible for the estates of Pharaoh and was often referred to in Egypt as “The Great Chief in the Palace” or “The Great Steward of the Two Lands” meaning both Upper and Lower Egypt. Since land was the main source of wealth in the ancient world, this meant that the vizier's responsibilities were extensive. Interestingly, a foreign vizier was not impossible in Egypt, as both Amenhotep II (15th century BC) and Amenhotep III (14th century BC) had viziers who were Semetic.

The phrase “all my people shall be obedient to you” (v. 40) is literally translated “all my people will kiss you on the mouth” which, as strange as it may seem to modern readers, was a sign of submission and homage to a lord, even as late as the Middle Ages. Perhaps more meaningfully it can also be translated to “give heed, obey” or “yield, submit to.” However translated, it was clear that Joseph was given great power in Egypt and that obedience to him and following his plan was not optional. Joseph had gone from following orders to giving them.

Having announced to his courtiers that Joseph would be second in command in all of Egypt, Pharaoh then took steps to make this change in his administration known to all the people of the land.

“⁴¹Pharaoh also said to Joseph, ‘see, I have placed you over all the land of Egypt.’ ⁴²Then Pharaoh took off his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph’s hand, and clothed him in garments of fine linen, and put the gold necklace around his neck” (v. 41-42)

To ensure there was no misunderstanding, Pharaoh emphasized that Joseph was not only over Pharaoh’s house, but over “all the land of Egypt” (v. 41). He was not simply another steward in the palace. There was no place in the entire kingdom that was not under Joseph’s authority. And to signify his empowering of Joseph, Pharaoh gave Joseph “his signet ring from his hand” (v. 42). This was to be the symbol of his new position and representation of his new power and authority. This ornament was likely the scarab ring that bore Pharaoh’s personal seal. In a world where information like the appointment of a new official would not appear in the morning paper, this ring would serve to validate Joseph’s claim to power as he traveled to distant parts of Egypt to put his plan into effect.

Joseph was also given fine linen and a gold necklace, further signs of his new place of prestige at court. To present a new court official or priest with fine linen was a common feature of Egyptian investiture. The term refers to the finest fabric made in Egypt, and it was later used by the Israelites in crafting their tabernacle and in making their priestly vestments (Exodus 25:4, 28:5). We can imagine that the other court officials were looking on enviously, and probably resentfully, as Pharaoh made Joseph his new favorite. Yet, throughout this ceremony, it seems from Scripture that Joseph said nothing. We cannot know how astonished he was at his sudden change of fortune. We can only wonder if, as he was being dressed by Pharaoh’s attendants in the fine linen garments, he recalled the time he was given the handmade coat by his father as a sign of his being Jacob’s favorite at home. We can only wonder if he recalled his dreams of many years ago when he saw himself elevated in the eyes of others. And we can only wonder what the cupbearer thought of all this, if he was concerned that with his new power Joseph would punish him for his forgetfulness and leaving Joseph in prison these past two years.

Then, for the second time in his life, Joseph goes on a life-changing journey.

⁴³And he had him ride in his second chariot; and they proclaimed ahead of him, ‘bow the knee!’ And he placed him over all the land of Egypt. ⁴⁴Moreover, Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘though I am Pharaoh, yet without your permission no one shall raise his hand or foot in all the land of Egypt’” (v. 43-44).

The first journey had been involuntary. Joseph had been most unwillingly carried into captivity by the Ishmaelites. This time, though, Joseph was in charge. He rode in the chariot standing upright, not shackled in chains. He was no longer the kidnap victim, now he was the exalted hero. Pharaoh “had him ride in his second chariot; and they proclaimed ahead of him, ‘bow the knee!’” (v. 43). The phrase translated “bow the knee” can also be translated “attention, make way for” or “do homage, bow” and it clearly meant that Joseph was being announced to all the people of Egypt as second only to Pharaoh. This historical detail, too, was a common feature of the ancient world. Recall that when Absalom tried to gain power in Israel, a strategy he employed was to “provide for himself a chariot and horses, and fifty men to run ahead of him” (2 Samuel 15:1). This was the social media of the ancient world.

As a summation of Joseph's new position, "Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'though I am Pharaoh, yet without your permission no one shall raise his hand or foot in all the land of Egypt'" (v. 44). Curiously, the language used by Pharaoh replicated the language used by Joseph when he denied any ability to interpret the dreams in his own power. Joseph's "it has nothing to do with me" (v. 16) implied the same sense of absoluteness as Pharaoh's "no one shall raise his hand or foot" (v. 44). Remember that Pharaoh was believed to be the living incarnation of the god Horus, and his chief role was to mediate between the gods and his kingdom. He strived to maintain *maat*, meaning order in the land. Peace and prosperity were his to ensure. Now he was delegating to the Hebrew Joseph that vital role.

Finally, to formalize Joseph's introduction to Egyptian high society, Pharaoh took the liberty of changing his name and giving him an Egyptian bride. ⁴⁵"Then Pharaoh named Joseph Zaphenath-paneah; and he gave him Asenath, the daughter of Potiphara priest of On, to be his wife. And Joseph went out over the land of Egypt" (v. 45).

Joseph was now to be called Zaphenath-paneah, a name that may mean either "God speaks, he lives" or "the man who knows all things" or "the sustainer of life" in Egyptian. That the sacred historian did not himself give an interpretation of the name may indicate that it simply was not important to the Joseph narrative. In fact, neither Joseph's Egyptian name, nor his wife, are mentioned again in Scripture.

While Joseph may have been overwhelmed into silence by his sudden promotion from the dungeon to the palace, and thus received the ring, clothing, and necklace in astonishment, it is curious that Joseph seems to have remained silent as he was given a new name and a wife. He had been bold to speak out about Pharaoh's dream and even to offer Pharaoh unsolicited advice on dealing with the great famine that was to come. But here he was silent. Perhaps he realized he was in no position to challenge Pharaoh and the very personal cultural changes he was insisting on. Also, perhaps Joseph realized that they were unimportant and would not be offensive to his God. That Scripture does not condemn Joseph for accepting these changes seems to indicate that there was no cause to condemn him.

Joseph's new bride was Asenath, the daughter of Potiphara. Though their names are similar, this is not the same as the Potiphar who had previously owned Joseph. That man had been a captain of the bodyguard. Joseph's new father-in-law was an Egyptian priest. He served in the temples at On, better known as Heliopolis, a city about seven miles northeast of Cairo. It was a religious center for the worship of Re and Atum, the Egyptian solar deities, among the other gods. That his daughter was named Asenath, which means "may she belong to Neith" may be a sign of the goddess Potiphara either served or felt a specific attachment to, and of his devotion to her. Scripture does not inform us as to why Pharaoh chose this particular woman for Joseph, but the fact that Joseph was married into the priestly class was a further sign of his enhanced prestige and influence.

Interestingly, this marriage was probably considered an honor in Egyptian eyes, but was later disparaged by religious leaders in Israel. To them, marriage to the daughter of a pagan priest was not acceptable behavior for a patriarch. A later Jewish text, the *Genesis Rabbah*, insisted that Asenath was the offspring of the rape of Dinah by Shechem, thus giving her a Jewish heritage.

The passage ends with a summary of Joseph's transformation. "Now Joseph was thirty years old when he stood in the presence of Pharaoh, king of Egypt. And Joseph went out from the presence of Pharaoh and went through all the land of Egypt" (v. 46). We were first introduced to Joseph when he was a pretentious adolescent seventeen years old (Genesis 39:2). Now he was a man of thirty and in a position of great influence not only in Egypt, but as we will soon see, throughout the entire Middle East. In those intervening years not much had gone right for Joseph, though often it had been, at least in part, his own fault. During those thirteen years, he had been a slave and then an inmate. Now he was second to Pharaoh, and he would remain so for the next eighty years (Genesis 50:26).

Years of Plenty, Years of Famine

Joseph had much to do in his new position. For the abundance that God had promised began immediately.

⁴⁷During the seven years of plenty the land produced abundantly. ⁴⁸So he collected all the food of these seven years which occurred in the land of Egypt and put the food in the cities; he put in every city the food from its own surrounding fields. ⁴⁹Joseph stored up grain in great abundance like the sand of the sea, until he stopped measuring it, for it was beyond measure." (v. 47-49).

Egypt experienced not just its usual agricultural productivity, which was substantial, but instead such abundance as was unheard of. It was, in fact, "beyond measure" (v. 49). The word literally means 'fistful' and implied that the grain supply was overflowing as grain might do so if one had grasped too big a portion in taking a handful. Such a metaphor reminds the reader of God's promise of descendants given to the patriarchs.

"Now look toward the heavens and count the stars, if you are able to count them. And He said to him, so shall your descendants be" (Genesis 15:5).

"Indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand, which is on the seashore" (Genesis 22:17).

"I will assuredly make you prosper and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which is too great to be counted" (Genesis 32:12).

Like the stars in the night sky, or the sand on the seashore, the amount of grain being harvested in Egypt was "beyond measure" (v. 49).

Joseph was acting in the capacity of the "Overseer of the Granaries of Pharaoh" or "The Overseer of the Granaries of Upper and Lower Egypt" which were official government positions during Egypt's Middle Kingdom. And clearly Joseph did his job well. He not only was blessed by God with the foresight of knowing what to do, but also with the ability to execute the plan. Joseph took full advantage of the opportunity God afforded him. He let neither grain nor time go to waste. And all of Egypt must have cooperated with Joseph though, admittedly, they had little choice if they did not want to offend Pharaoh. And Joseph was efficient. He "put in every city the food from its own surrounding fields" (v. 48). There was no extra transporting of food from one region to another. Each harvested crop was stored in a nearby

city as quickly as possible to reduce spoilage and to be ready to be supplied to the people when that time came.

Just as the land of Egypt was fruitful so, too, was Joseph's marriage. Indeed the two sons born to Joseph were themselves symbolic of the abundance of Egypt.

“⁵⁰Now before the year of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph, whom Asenath, the daughter of Potiphara, priest of On, bore to him. ⁵¹Joseph named the firstborn Manasseh; ‘for,’ he said, ‘God has made me forget all my trouble and all of my father’s household.’ ⁵²And he named the second Ephraim; ‘for,’ he said, ‘God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction’” (v. 50-52).

So during that first seven years of good and plentiful harvests, Asenath bore two sons to Joseph. And unlike the practice in Canaan, where it was the custom, though not the rule, that the mothers named the child, Joseph took it upon himself to assign them names. He named the first child Manasseh. The name means “one who causes to forget,” and it was perhaps intended to close the book on the last thirteen years of Joseph's life. This may seem logical, after all Joseph was finally in a position to put his past behind him. He had risen from the slave quarters and the dungeon to the palace. The offenses of his brothers and Potiphar's wife could be more easily forgiven now that he was second in power in all of Egypt.

Also, we should remark that the ‘trouble’ to which Joseph referred had its parallel with the future experience of the Hebrews when they served as slaves in Egypt, “then we cried out to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our wretched condition, our trouble, and our oppression” (Deuteronomy 26:7). Thus Scripture shows us that Joseph's personal experience as a slave foreshadowed that of his descendants many years later.

But it is curious that Joseph added the phrase “and all of my father's household” (v. 51). Certainly Joseph meant to include the harsh treatment he had received from his brothers, but is it likely that he also meant his father, who had favored him, as well as the dreams that promised his promotion within the family? Interestingly, Scripture gives no evidence that Joseph tried to contact his family and relate to his father his very much improved circumstances in Egypt. Nor does it give a reason why he did not do so. It is impossible to think that Joseph could have left Egypt and returned to Canaan even if he had wanted to do so, but surely he could have sent a messenger to find his family had he chosen to do so. Perhaps Joseph really was beginning a new life and had given up on any future in Canaan.

The second son Joseph named Ephraim. If Manasseh's name was to signify what Joseph had suffered in the past, this name was to remind him of what God was doing in the present. As God had preserved Joseph, so now He blessed him. And the blessings were not just the sons. Joseph was to be the vehicle by which Egypt would be saved during the famine. And though it seems Joseph had lost hope of ever seeing his family again, he was to be the instrument God used to continue the chosen line.

But as God had said, after the seven years of abundance, there would be a great famine.

“⁵³When the seven years of plenty which had taken place in the land of Egypt came to an end, ⁵⁴and the seven years of famine began to come, just as Joseph had said, then there was famine in all the lands; but in all the land of Egypt there was bread. ⁵⁵So when all the land of Egypt suffered famine, the people cried out to Pharaoh for bread; and Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, ‘go to Joseph; whatever he says to you, you shall do.’ ⁵⁶When the famine was spread over the entire face of the earth, then Joseph opened all the storehouses and sold grain to the Egyptians; and the famine was severe in the land of Egypt. ⁵⁷Then the people of all the earth came to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph, because the famine was severe in all the earth” (v. 53-57).

During the famine, it seems that the only issue was lack of food. That is to say, there is no mention of a lack of water. So, while it was common for famines to be brought about by drought, Scripture does not state that there was any lack of water in Egypt. Thus, God may have used insects, crops disease, or some other environmental factor to bring about the famine. In the ancient world, warfare was another significant cause of famine, but it seems likely that if God used that means to bring famine to Egypt, Scripture would have mentioned it. However the famine came about, Scripture goes to great lengths to emphasize that it was as devastating as predicted. The famine was in “all the lands” (v. 54). Eventually it “spread over the entire face of the earth” (v. 56). It was “severe in all the earth” (v. 57).

When the surplus that individuals and families had set aside was used up, the people turned to Pharaoh. Pharaoh simply said “go to Joseph” (v. 55), curiously referring to him by his Hebrew, rather than his Egyptian, name. It may not be that this means that hundreds of thousands of people went to Joseph personally, but rather that Pharaoh was indicating that the plan laid out by Joseph was being implemented and that the people should follow whatever instructions Joseph and his administrators had put in place for the distribution of the surplus grain.

Scripture also does not tell us how word of Egypt having extra supplies of grain spread to other nations, but clearly word did spread. Egypt was frequently known in the ancient world to be a place of abundance, so perhaps it was only natural that people went there first. And Scripture is clear that of all the nations of the world, Egypt alone had abundance. The known world had no food, but in Egypt there was plenty. That meant that other nations sent emissaries to Egypt to buy what they could not grow themselves. And among those visitors, were sons of a patriarch in Canaan, who was still, no doubt, mourning for his son killed by a wild animal more than twenty years ago. Events were transpiring exactly as God had intended to bring about His plan for His people.

Takeaways

First, let us see how God works. God used dreams to not only save Joseph, but all of Egypt. He also used the famine to preserve the chosen line. His ways are not our ways, and His timing is not always our timing, but His ways are righteous and His timing is perfect.

Second, we must note that though Joseph was second only to Pharaoh, he never wavered in his devotion to him or to the cause of Egypt. He was as faithful to Pharaoh as he had been to Potiphar and to his jailer. He never abused his position or tried to usurp authority that was not his. God blessed him for that.