



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Class Notes

Joseph and Potiphar's Wife

Genesis 39.1–23

Part 1: Background / Joseph and Potiphar

Some Big Picture Items

1. We continue our study of the tenth/final section of Genesis, the תּוֹלְדוֹת (*tolēdot*) of Jacob (37.2), the longest section of Genesis.
 - a. Compared to the next longest: Terah (11.27–25.11) – 9,206 words (ESV; 7,200 Heb); Jacob (37.2–50.26) – 11,245 words (ESV; 8,542 Heb).
 - b. The *ESV Study Bible* outline divides 11.27–50.26 into three sections:
 - 1) Terah's descendants (11.27–25.18) – 9,236 (Hebrew: 7,302)
 - 2) Isaac's descendants (25.19–37.1) – 9,538 (Hebrew: 7,450)
 - 3) Jacob's descendants (37.1–50.26) – 11,245 (Hebrew: 8,542)
2. Most of the Jacob תּוֹלְדוֹת (*tolēdot*) is concerned with Joseph; the account is well-crafted and consists of ten episodes (Longacre 2003, 471–473).
 - a. Joseph sold into slavery (Gen 37).
 - b. Joseph rises to prominence in Potiphar's house (Gen 39.1–6).
 - c. Joseph's degradation (Gen 39.7–23).
 - d. Joseph interprets the dreams of two members of Pharaoh's court (Gen 40).
 - e. Joseph interprets Pharaoh's dreams and rises to power as second in command in Egypt (Gen 41).
 - f. Joseph's brothers' first visit to Egypt for famine relief (Gen 42).
 - g. Joseph's brothers return and are tested by and reconciled to Joseph (Gen 43–45).
 - h. Jacob and his family settle in Egypt (Gen 46.1–47.12).
 - i. Last years of famine relief, Egypt becomes more desperate (47.13–31).
 - j. Manasseh and Epharaim blessed by Jacob (Gen 48).
3. Two matters of structure and emphasis.
 - a. Chapter 39.1 resumes the earlier narrative pertaining to Joseph by recapitulating the event described in 37:36 (Harris 2019, 39.1).
 - b. As crafted, the Jacob-Judah-Joseph development in chapters 37–39 accomplishes three things.
 - 1) It's good story-telling: we're anxious to see what becomes of Joseph at the end of chapter 37.
 - 2) The two major recipients of Jacob's blessing and players in the continuation of the promise-blessing narrative are introduced.

- a) Judah is the heir through whose line all nations will be blessed (Gen 49.8–12); he also plays a key role in the subsequent encounter of the brothers and Joseph (43.3, 8; 44.14, 16, 18; 46.12, 28).
- b) Joseph retains his place as Jacob's favorite (Gen 48.1–22; 49.22–26).¹
- 3) The accounts of the favored brothers in chapters 38–39 present an interesting contrast.
 - a) Judah's actions are shameful, though he is rewarded with descendants (38.27–30), despite his sabotage of his future legacy (38.11, 24).
 - b) Joseph acts with honorable integrity, rises in Potiphar's and then Pharaoh's esteem, and saves his brothers and the blessing (Matthews 2005, loc. 19,571).

Joseph Prospers in Potiphar's House

4. Chapter 39: overview and context.
 - a. The chapter has three parts (structured in a chiastic arrangement).
 - 1) Joseph prospers in Potiphar's house (39.1–6a).
 - 2) Potiphar's wife seduces Joseph (39.6b–19).
 - 3) Joseph prospers in Pharaoh's prison (39.20–23).
 - b. It also serves as the introduction to chapters 39–41 which describe Joseph's experience in Egypt before the arrival of his brothers (Mathews 2005, loc 19,579).
5. With the chapter's beginning, the story is formally in Egypt (מִצְרַיִם, *miṣrayim*).²
 - a. The *ESV Study Bible* notes that “Joseph arrived in Egypt during the reign of the Twelfth Dynasty [1963–1786 BC], arguably the zenith of Egypt's power” (Dennis 2008, map note, p. 118).³
 - b. The *ESV Archaeology Study Bible* adds: “The time of Joseph fits well with the latter part of the Middle Bronze II period (2000–1550 BC); Egypt was ruled by the Hyksos, foreigners who invaded Egypt and set up their capital at Avaris. There was significant travel on the roads from Palestine to Egypt, and it would not have been abnormal for a Semitic foreigner like Joseph to rise to power through a series of circumstances as described in Genesis 39–41” (Currid and Chapman 2017, Gen 39).
6. Verses 1–2: the Lord prospers Joseph.
 - a. Verses 1–6 reports the success the Lord gave Joseph, first in Potiphar's household.
 - b. Interestingly, Psalm 105.16–18 recalls this moment in history as the beginning of the Lord's deliverance of his people (Mathews 2005, loc 19,703).
7. Verse 2 makes three observations on Joseph's status.
 - a. “The LORD was with him,” a refrain repeated in vv. 3, 5, 21, 23 (the latter two while in Pharaoh's prison). The phrase points to “success, prosperity or victory” (Matthews 2005, loc 19,703).

¹ Longacre 2003 (474) writes, “It is clear that Judah and Joseph get a good deal more ‘coverage’ from the dying father than do the others, and a certain preeminence is granted to both. The scepter is to go to Judah with the accompanying promise (Gen 49:10), but to Joseph, as the continuing favorite of his father, rights and privileges are given such as would be given a firstborn.... Among the descendants of Jacob, Judah and Joseph are to be preeminent both as individuals and as tribes—with ambiguous and somewhat conflicting claims.”

² Kitchen 2003 (207) notes that in biblical Hebrew, the usual word for Egypt is *miṣrayim*.

³ In ancient Egyptian Chronology, there were thirty-one dynasties in eight major periods (Archaic, Old Kingdom, First Intermediate, Middle Kingdom, Second Intermediate, New Kingdom, Third Intermediate, Saite-Persian. Dynasties 11-12 were in the Middle Kingdom period (2106-1786 BC): Dynasty 11 (2106-1963), Dynasty 12 (1963-1786) (Walton 1994, 62–63).

- b. Because the LORD was with him, he was successful (NIV: “prospered”; פָּרַחַ, *šālah*, to prosper, prevail, succeed). This word is repeated in vv. 3, 23 (cf. Abraham’s servant, 24.21, 40, 42, 56).
 - c. Joseph was a household servant, not a field hand.
 - 1) This gave Potiphar first-hand knowledge of Joseph’s ability, but also made him vulnerable to Potiphar’s wife’s advances.
 - 2) But note that he is still a slave to “his Egyptian master.”
8. Verses 3–6a: Potiphar puts Joseph in charge.
- a. The repeated idea of divine blessing picks up on one of the important elements of the promises made to the patriarchs (e.g., 12.3; 18.18; 22.17; 30.27) (Alexander 2008, 119).
9. Verse 4 mentions the Lord’s “favor” (חֵן, *hēn*; cf. v. 21; Gen 6.4; 18.3) on Joseph.
- a. The specifics are not delineated, though “blessing” in Genesis typically involved material wealth (e.g., 24.35; 26.12; 30.27, 30), leading us to “surmise that the household operated smoothly and Potiphar increased his holdings” (Mathews 2005, loc 19,724).
 - b. The blessings anticipate what will occur later when Joseph is second in command to Pharaoh (cf. 41.49; 47.15–26).
 - c. Notice that Joseph is called Potiphar’s attendant (NIV; CSB: personal attendant); a personal subordinate (e.g., Josh 24.13; cf. Gen 40.4) (Mathews 2005, loc 19,731).
10. Verse 5 – the temporal clause, “from the time that he made him overseer,” “indisputably ties the period of success with the appointment of Joseph” (Mathews 2005, loc 19,743).
11. Verse 6 – “the food he ate” may mean either that Potiphar’s greatest problem was planning and eating his meals or that seeing to it that the food eaten by his household was properly prepared according to Egyptian rituals which a foreigner would not know or could legally perform (or both, DA) (Willis 1979, 398).
12. I’ll note one takeaway from vv. 1–6a: good circumstances are not a prerequisite for faithfulness. Joseph was faithful (and blessed) despite his circumstances, not because of them.

Part 2: Joseph and Potiphar’s Wife

Seduction

13. Finding Joseph to be “handsome in form and [handsome in] appearance”⁴ (v. 6), Potiphar’s wife begins to seduce him. Notice both the progressive nature of the seduction and its directness.
- a. She “cast her eyes on Joseph and said, ‘Lie with me’” (v. 7).
 - 1) “Cast her eyes on” emphasizes her deliberate and careful scrutiny of him (Harris 2019, 39.7).
 - b. “She spoke to Joseph day after day” (v. 10).
 - c. “She caught him by his garment, saying ‘Lie with me’” (v. 12).

Resistance

14. Again, there is a repetition.
- a. “But he refused” (v. 8).
 - b. In her response to her daily advances, “he would not listen to her” (v. 10).

⁴ The Hebrew word, יָפָה (yāpāh) is used twice in this verse. Cf. NET translation, “well-built and good-looking,” and the note: “handsome of form and handsome of appearance.’ The same Hebrew expressions were used in Gen 29:17 for Rachel.”

- c. When she caught him by the garment, “he left the garment in her hand and fled” (v. 12).
 1) The Hebrew construction stresses that Joseph got out of there quickly (Harris 2019, 39.12).
15. Some observations on Joseph’s refusal.
- a. It contrasts with the behavior of both Reuben (with Bilhah, Gen 35.22) and Judah (with Tamar, 38.15–18).
 b. He didn’t calculate possible gains from placating Potiphar’s wife (Longacre 2003, 475).
16. His reasons for refusing are noteworthy.
- a. He refused to abuse Potiphar’s trust (v. 8).
 b. He understood that to give in was to sin against Potiphar (v. 9).
 c. He also understood that giving in would be a sin against God (v. 9).
17. Note also the nature of his moral decision.
- a. He apparently understood ahead of time what his priority had to be.
 1) Willis (1979, 400) notes that “there is no indication in Genesis prior to this event that God had given a command that prohibited adultery and that therefore what is involved here is much more than simply disobeying a divine law.”⁵
 2) He notes further that, as beings created in God’s image (Gen 1.26–27), to show disrespect or dishonor to a man (e.g., by killing him, 9.6) or woman (by committing adultery with her) is to sin against God (cf. Gen 20.6; 39.9; 2 Sam 12.13; Ps 41.4 [Hebrew 5]; 51.4 [Hebrew 6] since they are made in God’s image (Willis 1979, 400–401).
 b. He also understood that sometimes the only way to avoid sin is to run from the temptation (cf. Prov 4.14–17; 5.8; 7.7–8, 25; 1 Cor 6.18; 2 Tim 2.22).
 1) As John Willis notes, this is not cowardice, but the realistic acknowledgment of the power of sin (cf. 1 Cor 10.14; 1 Tim 6.11) and of one’s need for God’s help in times of trial and temptation (Acts 26.22; 1 Cor 10.12–13; Heb 13.5–6) (Willis 1979, 401).
 c. Whatever his education or specific reasons, it is evident that Joseph did the right thing just because it was the right thing.
18. But Joseph’s situation also illustrates that doing the right thing does not necessarily spare us from adverse consequences.
- a. Leaving his garment (a form of the term **בִּגְדוֹ**; *beqed*, is used six times in the passage; vv. 12 [2x], 13, 15, 16, 17, 18; cf. 37.29) provided her with a prop for accusing him.

Retaliation

19. Notice Potiphar’s wife’s retaliation.
- a. She tells her story to “the men of her household” (v. 14), putting implicit pressure on them.
 b. She then repeats it to Potiphar (after carefully holding on to the evidence) (vv. 16–18).
20. Her telling is a master class in how to smear someone (cf. Alexander 2008, 119).
- a. She blames Potiphar (vv. 14, 17, 19), casting herself and others as victims.
 1) In verse 19, she refers to Joseph as “your” servant” (cf. Gen 3.12–13).

⁵ Mathews 2005, loc. 19,601, says that Joseph’s conviction and action implies that God had a standard for the fathers (cf. Gen 15.6; 17.1; 20.6, 9; 26.10; 44.16; 50.17). He also references a rabbinic tradition which attributes Joseph’s resistance to the influence of Jacob, an indication that at least some of the rabbis sought to understand why he acted as he did.

- b. She preys on societal prejudices, emphasizing that Joseph is a “Hebrew” (vv. 14, 17).⁶
- c. She portrays Joseph’s action as being directed against the entire household, part of a scheme to make sport of (NIV; “make a fool of” CSB) her and the other Egyptians (vv. 14, 17).
 - 1) “Laugh” (ESV) (שָׂחָק, *śāḥaq*) recalls Gen 21.9 and 26.8 where it has connotations of “making fun of someone” and “caressing” respectively.

Consequences

- 21. Potiphar responds to his wife’s report with “anger” and then imprisons Joseph (vv. 19–20).
 - a. It’s possible that his anger is directed more toward his wife than Joseph; that would fit the sense of the sentence as it appears in verse 19 (Walton 2009, 127).⁷
 - 1) It is not hard to imagine that this is not the first time he would have experienced this aspect of his wife’s character.
 - b. It is of interest that Pharaoh’s cupbearer and baker will meet Joseph “in custody in the house of the captain of the guard” (40.3), the same phrase we see in 37.36; 39.1; cf. 41.10, 12).
 - 1) Walton suggests that “it appears that Joseph is detained under Potiphar’s supervision and is there again given authority. In other words, he is transferred to another part of Potiphar’s house.”
 - 2) He continues, “This does not mean that his imprisonment is a farce, but it suggests that Potiphar’s anger may well have been directed toward his wife and that after an adequate show of indignation, Joseph is gradually moved into a position of authority” (Walton 2009, 127).
- 22. Whether or not that interpretation is correct, Joseph was successful again, for the same reason as before: “the LORD was with Joseph” (vv. 21, 23)—as he will continue to be as the story proceeds.

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⁶ “Hebrew” (עִבְרִי, *‘Ibriy*) may be related to *Ḥapiru*, “a term that was used widely throughout the ancient Near East for peoples who migrated across national boundaries and stood socially between free citizens and slaves. Possibly the Hebrews of the OT were a part of a larger ethnic or social group called the Ḥapiru who migrated from the Mesopotamian area into Palestine and Egypt (see the note on 14:13).” (Willis 1979, 401; cf. Mandell 2000, 567–568 for elaboration).

⁷ Hamilton’s comments on verses 19–20 are more nuanced, encompassing both the view that Potiphar’s anger was directed at Joseph and that he was not taken in by his wife: “Potiphar is gullible. He immediately accepts the story his wife tells him. But why shouldn’t he? For what reason ought he to suspect his wife of lying? One would think, however, that if Potiphar is certain that Joseph tried to rape his wife in his absence, then he would immediately order Joseph’s execution. Perhaps Potiphar’s decree that Joseph be incarcerated, not executed, is a sign that he is not totally convinced about the authenticity of his wife’s story” (Hamilton 1995, 471).

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