



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Class Notes

## Joseph Interprets Pharaoh's Dreams

Genesis 41.1–32

### *The Big Picture*

1. Chapter 41 is episode 5 in Joseph's story (see [here](#)) and completes the unit of chapters 39–41.
2. After the preparation of chapters 39–40, the narrative makes its major dramatic turn. As 40.23 indicates, Joseph is no better off at the end of chapter 40 than he was at the end of chapter 37: he is still forgotten, and his grand dreams are no nearer to being realized. His belief in divine providence must have been severely tested as he was forgotten for two years in prison (Longacre 2003, 475).
3. By God's sovereignty, his situation will markedly change in chapter 41, which occurs "two whole years" (v. 1) after the events at the close of chapter 40 (cf. Joseph timeline in Alexander 2008, 114).

### *Background Matters*

4. Like life in Egypt generally, Pharaoh's dreams revolve around the importance of the Nile (literally "the river," נַיִל, *y<sup>e</sup>ʾor*; six times in vv. 2–3, 17–18).
  - a. The narrow Nile Valley and broad alluvial soil of the Egyptian Delta through which the river reached the Mediterranean were the only habitable areas of Egypt, barely five percent of the land surface in modern Egypt (Kitchen 2003, 207).
  - b. When it flooded, things were good in Egypt; when it did not, the economy suffered.<sup>1</sup>
  - c. But the river was also an expression of the imperial power of fertility. Proper administration permitted the king to generate and guarantee life; failure of the Nile and its life system meant the empire did not have the power of life (cf. Ezek 29.3).<sup>2</sup>
    - 1) "An assault on the Nile strikes at the heart of Pharaoh's claim to authority" (Brueggemann 1982, 327).
5. A related natural feature is the east wind (three times, vv. 6, 23, 27), the sirocco that blew from the desert southeast of Egypt from February to June and destroyed many plants because of the extreme heat and drought produced (Willis 1979, 406).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Walton reports records from the 19th century BC in which Nile flooding reached as high as 16 feet, extending the fertile areas. But in succeeding years it markedly declined and ten years later it was only 1½ feet high (Walton 2009, 130).

<sup>2</sup> Ezek 29.3: "Thus says the Lord GOD: 'Behold, I am against you, Pharaoh king of Egypt, the great dragon that lies in the midst of his streams, that says, "My Nile is my own; I made it for myself."'"

<sup>3</sup> "קָדִיִּם *qādiym* 69x – n.m. [7709]. 'east, eastern, the direction of orientation in the ancient Near East (facing the sunrise); east is also the direction of the great desert, thus an east or desert wind is particularly hot'" (Kohlenberger & Mounce, 2012, ¶ 15.477).

6. Pharaoh's<sup>4</sup> dreams initiate the action, but he is not controlling the events (v. 1), as Brueggemann (1982, 326) observes: "The dream takes the initiative away from Pharaoh. The king is no longer the subject, but the object. He receives messages. He does not generate them."
7. The importance of dreams and their interpretation.
  - a. A number of examples from the literature show that a king's dream was always of special importance and he customarily employed dream specialists to interpret and offer advice as to how to proceed. Dreams were especially important if repeated (Walton 2009, 129).<sup>5</sup>
  - b. Their importance is seen in the fact that interpretation manuals were compiled for deciphering them (Kitchen 2003, 209).<sup>6</sup>

### *Some Interpretation Issues*

8. The repetition of the word translated "behold" or "look" (הִנְנֵה, *hēnnāh*; vv. 1–3, 5–7, 18–19, 22–23) invites the reader to observe the scene through the narrator's or Pharaoh's eyes.
9. The "magicians" and "wise men" were the experts in dream interpretation (v. 8).
  - a. "Magicians" (חֲרֹטְמֵי, *ḥarṭom*; from an Egyptian loanword) were the Egyptian "chief lector priests" who also practiced the magical arts.
    - 1) They were trained in the "House of Life," where guidebooks for interpretation were produced (as known from the 12th century BC); these books were involved in the interpretation of dreams by discerning puns and symbols (Mathews 2005, loc. 20,309).
  - b. The "wise men" (חֲכָמִים, *ḥākām*) at court were most likely educated, intellectually capable advisers who were also believed to be gifted by the gods (Mathews 2005, loc. 20.316).
10. Joseph had to shave before he could appear before Pharaoh (v. 14). Egyptian monuments certify that male Egyptians were characteristically clean-shaven and at times their heads were as well (bald or close-cropped). They would then wear wigs made of human hair. The text here is unclear about the extent to which Joseph was shaved (Walton 2009, 130).
11. Notice the contrast between abundance/plenty (six times, vv. 29–31, 34, 47, 53) and famine (eight times, vv. 27, 30–31, 36, 50, 54, 56, 57),<sup>7</sup> the severity of which in this case would be such that "the famine will devastate the land" (v. 30 NET).<sup>8</sup>
12. Joseph's dreams resolved things for Pharaoh.
  - a. Translations of verse 16.
    - 1) ESV: "Joseph answered Pharaoh, 'It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh *a favorable answer*.'"
     - 2) NASB 2020: "Joseph then answered Pharaoh, saying, 'It has nothing to do with me; God will give Pharaoh *an answer for his own good*.'"
     - 3) NET: "Joseph replied to Pharaoh, 'It is not within my power, but God will speak *concerning the welfare of Pharaoh*.'"

<sup>4</sup> Probably one of the 17th century BC Hyksos rulers (Willis 1979, 406).

<sup>5</sup> These dream examples in the literature of Egypt gave warnings, informed the king concerning the future, and offered absolution. Pharaoh's dreams in Genesis 41 contain the first two of these (Walton 2009, 130).

<sup>6</sup> Kitchen (2003, 209) references the Chester Beatty papyrus III, housed in the British Museum. These writings are from the 13th century BC, but the classical language within them indicates that they are likely a recopy of a manual first composed in the early second millennium, before the time of Joseph.

<sup>7</sup> An inscription found on Sehel Island provides evidence of another seven-year famine, showing that such events were not unknown (Walton 2009, 130).

<sup>8</sup> "The Hebrew verb כָּלָה (*kalah*) in the Piel stem means 'to finish, to destroy, to bring an end to.' The severity of the famine will ruin the land of Egypt" (Harris 2019, ch. 41, n. 51).

- b. “The expression שְׁלוֹם פַּרְעֹה (*sh<sup>e</sup>lom par<sup>o</sup>h*) is here rendered ‘the welfare of Pharaoh’ [NET] because the dream will be about life in his land. Some interpret it to mean an answer of ‘peace’—one that will calm his heart, or give him the answer that he desires (cf. NIV, NRSV, NLT)” (Harris 2019, ch. 41, n. 32).

### *Theological Applications*

13. The major theological idea, as in chapters 37–50 as a whole, is *God’s providence*: “The primary emphasis in this lengthy paragraph [vv. 1–52] is that God is in control of history and human life, even in the strange and foreign land of Egypt” (Willis 1979, 406).
- a. It is he who:
    - 1) Elevates Joseph from the dungeon (v. 14) to be the vizier in Egypt (vv. 32–33, 38–40, 44).
    - 2) Gives Joseph the interpretation of Pharaoh’s dream (vv. 16, 25, 39).
    - 3) Brings seven years of abundance and famine (vv. 28, 32).
    - 4) Guides Joseph in the proper preparation for the famine (vv. 32–36, 46–49).
    - 5) Gives Joseph two sons (vv. 50–52).
  - b. Standing between the futility of Pharaoh (vv. 1–8) and the well-being of Egypt (vv. 9–45) is Joseph, God’s servant (Brueggemann 1982, 329).
  - c. “In this enormous claim, we are not dealing with a marginal incident in the Bible. We are confronted here with the very premise of much of biblical faith: God has the capacity to work newness against every administered convention” (Brueggemann 1982, 331).
14. But behind his providence is *God’s sovereignty*.
- a. As noted at the outset, Pharaoh is not controlling events.
    - 1) The dreams are a new reality he cannot domesticate; no wonder he is troubled (v. 8).
    - 2) Verses 1–8 expose this subversive with its “announcement that unauthorized and unacceptable messages have penetrated the empire. The substance of those messages is that the claims of the empire are fraudulent. Egypt has become not a place of life, but of death. Joseph appears just as the presumed conventional world of the empire is placed in deep crisis” (Brueggemann 1982, 328).
  - b. His best laid plans are being subverted by a power he can never overcome. As Brueggemann writes, “The criterion of the true God (cf. Isa. 41:21–29) is that God is the one who can cause a future. In Gen. 41, it is clear that Pharaoh can cause no future. Nor can he resist the future that God will bring” (Brueggemann 1982, 331).

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### **Works Cited**

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