



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Class Notes

## Joseph Rises to Power

Genesis 41.33–57

### Reviewing 41.1–32

1. Chapter 41 is episode 5 in Joseph's story (see [here](#)) and completes the unit of chapters 39–41.
  - a. The narrative makes a major dramatic turn, transforming Joseph from forgotten dreamer (40.23), languishing in prison two years after the cupbearer's restoration (41.1), to the pinnacle of power.
  - b. Two natural features of Egyptian life are central to the events.
    - 1) Life in Egypt, like Pharaoh's dreams, revolves around the importance of the Nile (literally "the river," נַיִם, *y<sup>e</sup>nor*; six times in vv. 2–3, 17–18).
    - 2) A related natural feature is the east wind (three times, vv. 6, 23, 27), the sirocco that typically 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).
  - c. Pharaoh's dreams initiate the action, but he is not controlling the events (v. 1); their prominence in the text illustrates the importance the ancients attached to dreams and their interpretation (note the "magicians" and "wise men" in v. 8: priests and officials trained in the magical arts and interpretation).
  - d. 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), the severity of which in this case would be such that "the famine will devastate the land" (v. 30 NET).

### Interpretation issues in 41.33–57

2. There is a shift at verse 33, indicated by the ESV's "therefore."
  - a. Joseph explained the meaning of Pharaoh's dream.
  - b. He predicted seven years of abundance followed by seven years of famine/devastation (vv. 25–32).
  - c. Beginning in v. 33, he advises Pharaoh to initiate a grain conservation program (Longacre 2003, 472).
3. Verses 34–36 present the plan for using the seven years of abundance to prepare for the coming famine.
  - a. One-fifth of the land's produce is to be taken and stored (v. 34).
  - b. Overseers will be appointed to collect the tax and store the grain—all under the authority of Pharaoh.
4. In verses 37–45, Pharaoh elevates Joseph to control over the land (the king excepted) and enforce the tax and storage plan.
  - a. Pharaoh sees that no one other than Joseph can do what needs to be done; he is appointed to be the Grand Vizier, Pharaoh's authorized representative who was director of the royal palace and second in command in Egypt (vv. 37–41) (cf. Willis 1979, 408).

- 1) It is not unusual to find accounts of officials who were elevated from lowly status to high positions of authority (Walton 2009, 132).
- 2) Evidence also exists that Semites, or people bearing Semitic names, achieved high office in multiple periods of Egyptian history (Mathews 2005, loc. 20,426).
- b. Verses 42–45 describe six official acts performed by Pharaoh to signify to the Egyptian people that Joseph is being appointed as the Grand Vizier (Willis 1979, 408–409).
  - 1) He gives Joseph his signet ring, allowing him to make decisions and authorize them in Pharaoh's name (Walton 2009, 132).
  - 2) He clothes Joseph in royal Egyptian garments of fine linen; the Hebrew word שֵׁשׁ (*shesh*) is an Egyptian loanword that describes the fine linen robes that Egyptian royalty wore. The clothing signified Joseph's rank (Harris 2019, verse 42).<sup>1</sup>
  - 3) He places a gold chain around Joseph's neck, likely the so-called "Reward of the Gold" which Pharaoh conferred on subjects as recognition of outstanding service rendered to the crown (Willis 1979, 408).
  - 4) He has Joseph ride in his second chariot, indicating that he is second in command (cf. 1 Sam 23.17; 2 Chron 28.7; 35.24; Esth 10.3).<sup>2</sup>
  - 5) He changes Joseph's name to *Zaphenath-paneah*; name changes were common in antiquity when a person was elevated to official government positions (cf. 2 King 23.34) (Willis 1979, 409).
    - a) *Zaphenath-paneah* has been variously interpreted to mean, "Ruler of the Nome Place of Life,"<sup>3</sup> "Savior of the World," "Revealer of Secrets," and "The god speaks and he lives" (Willis 1979, 409; cf. Harris 2019, verse 45).
  - 6) He arranges for Joseph to marry Asenath, daughter of one of the leading officials, Potiphara priest of On, the ancient biblical name for Heliopolis (cf. Jer 43.13), located about 7 miles NW of modern Cairo; in antiquity, it was a worship center for the sun deities, Re and Atum (Willis 1979, 409; Mathews 2005, loc. 20,447).<sup>4</sup>
5. In a summary statement in verses 46–49, Joseph's plan is enacted.
  - a. Verse 48 shows a wise plan as grain is stored in designated cities adjacent to the fields where the grain was produced.
  - b. Notice the overwhelming abundance as described in verse 49.

<sup>1</sup> Mathews 2005, loc. 20,442, notes that the fact that an Egyptian word for linen is used instead of the Hebrew word suggests that the author knew the early Egyptian practice well.

<sup>2</sup> Note that prior to 18th century BC, Egyptian dignitaries were transported in sedan chairs borne on servants' shoulders. "Then the Hyksos invaders introduced horses and chariots into Egyptian life. Well-built chariots have been found by archeologists in the grave of the Pharaoh Tut-ankh-Amon (1352–1344 B.C.); they have two wheels and a platform on which the charioteer and the official dignitary of the kingdom stood while traveling" (Willis 1979, 408).

<sup>3</sup> "nome, administrative division of ancient Egypt. The system of dividing the country into nomes was definitely in force by the time of the Old Kingdom (c. 2575–c. 2130 BC) and persisted with modifications until the Muslim conquest (AD 640). In late times there were 42 nomes, or provinces, 22 in Upper and 20 in Lower Egypt. In Ptolemaic times, a *heptanomis* of seven nomes was formed in Middle Egypt. The Nile valley south of Ombos was sometimes regarded as one with the province of Nubia, although in the Old Kingdom Elephantine was considered the 'door of the south.'"

"Each nome during the Old and Middle Kingdoms was administered by a nomarch, or district governor, who levied taxes, administered justice, and maintained an army" ("Nome," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/nome-ancient-Egyptian-government>, Retrieved 10/31/2025).

<sup>4</sup> "Joseph's marriage into the priestly family probably was deemed an honor in Egypt's eyes but was a consternation to the rabbis who balked at his marriage to the daughter of a pagan priest. *Tgs. Onq., Neof., and Ps.-J.* render "chief, master" (*rabbā*) for "priest," and Jewish midrash contended that Asenath was the daughter of Dinah and Shechem, giving her a Jewish heritage (*Tg. Ps.-J.; Gen. Rab.* 89.2; *Pirqe R. El.* 36.272; 38.287–88). As the offspring of Asenath, the Joseph tribes of Manasseh and Ephraim were in part descended from Egyptian ancestry" (Mathews 2005, loc. 20,481).

- 1) The Hebrew reads, “and Joseph gathered grain like the sand of the sea, multiplying much” (Harris 2019, verse 49).
  - 2) “Sand of the sea” is a standard hyperbole that means “beyond measure.” Its use reminds us that that imagery has been used to refer to the descendants of Abraham and Jacob (Gen 22.17; 32.12; cf. Jer 33.22; Hos 1.10 [2.1],
6. In verses 50–52, Joseph is blessed with a family.
    - a. Though the Israelite mother commonly assigned the name to the child based on her interpretation or sentiment regarding the event (e.g. Gen 4.25; cf. Exod 2.10; 1 Sam 1.20), Joseph does the naming here, giving them Hebrew names tied to his Egyptian experience (Mathews 2005, loc. 20,506)
    - b. Manasseh (מְנַשֶּׁה, *m<sup>e</sup>nasheh*), “he who brings about forgetfulness,” or “God has made me forget,” reminds Joseph that God has seen him through his trials with his family and in Egypt (Willis 1979, 409).
    - c. Ephraim (אֶפְרַיִם, *’efrayim*), means “to bear fruit,” or “God has made me fruitful,” and reminds Joseph of his newfound prosperity and elevation to royal power (Willis 1979, 409).
  7. Events proceed in verses 53–57 and we see a transition to the next phase of the narrative.

### *Theological Applications*

8. 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. Joseph, God’s servant, stood between the futility of Pharaoh (vv. 1–8) and the well-being of Egypt (vv. 9–45) (Bruggemann 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” (Bruggemann 1982, 331).
9. That understanding of God is the basis of *genuine optimism*.
  - a. Romans 8.18–39 is the ultimate statement of optimistic thinking.
    - 1) This text is not unrealistic about life and suffering; nor does it tell us to “just believe” regardless of circumstances.
    - 2) Rather it says that God will bring about ultimate good for those who revere him and live according to his purpose (v. 28 NIV), spelled out in verses 29–30 (on “glory” in v. 30, cf. vv. 18, 21; 3.23).
10. But behind his providence is *God’s sovereignty*.
  - a. As noted at the outset, Pharaoh is not controlling events: the dreams are a new reality he cannot domesticate; no wonder he is troubled (v. 8).
    - 1) 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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