

THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM – PART VIII -SECTION II

JOSEPH'S ADVENTURES IN EGYPT

I. After chapter 38 focuses on the beginning of the conversion of Judah, chapter 39 switches back to Joseph and his time in Egypt, where he rises, falls and rises again. In chapter 39, he is presented as talented, blessed by God, and innocent, but then suffering for his gifts.

A. The first six verses describe Joseph's meteoric rise to honor and position.

1. As with Abraham and Isaac before, the journey to Egypt is described as "going down" to Egypt. See Gen. 12:20, 26:2. In this case, the literal meaning is a descent in status, but there is also the moral idea of descending from the family of God.

2. However, in this new place, he prospers. He is sold to Potiphar, the Pharaoh's seris, which would be a chief steward or a captain of the household guard. Potiphar likely saw his talents and upbringing and put him in charge of his household.

- The word saris also often meant a eunuch, made so because some of the saris were in charge of Pharaoh's wives or harem. If such is the case here, it may explain his wife's later actions, as well as the absence of any mention of children.

3. Potiphar does not come off looking very good, for he seems to become rather lazy, concerning himself for nothing but food. In addition, he does not tell the Pharaoh about this talented young man. Sometimes God's blessings can make a person think less of God or others, which is one reason why God may not give them as much as seems best.

- There could be a more positive connotation of food having a sacred meaning, as in food used for ritual meals. In that case, Potiphar could have been focusing more on the religious realm, now that he is no longer burdened with worldly cares.

B. Joseph's gifts then lead to a trial, which he passes with great suffering.

1. The text begins with noted Joseph's beauty, in similar words to that of Rachel one generation earlier. See Gen. 29:17.

That beauty also leads to unnecessary conflicts.

2. Potiphar's wife longs for Joseph, possibly bored of her husband as an aging and possibly increasing fat man. (She may have also been significantly younger than Potiphar, who as a rich and powerful man could easily persuade a family to let him have their daughter.) And so she tries to persuade him to have relations with her.

3. Joseph justly refuses her, but with words that are more ambiguous than they should be.

a. It would be far better simply to tell her that she should be loyal to her husband and that adultery is inherently wrong.

b. Instead, Joseph explains why, for him, this particular act of adultery would be wrong, insofar as it would be a betrayal of the man who had trusted him so much. His statement is entirely accurate and does emphasize why this particular act of adultery would be especially wrong. However, by failing to defend marriage in general, he retreats somewhat. He may think it more diplomatic, but his need to explain himself, and the emphasis on Potiphar's weakness, probably encourages Potiphar's wife even more. Often, it is more challenging, but in the end, better, simply to state that an action is wrong than to give lengthy explanations that may give someone the impression that they can satisfy the concerns raised.

4. As a result, Potiphar's wife continues to pursue Joseph, resulting in the final encounter, which will lead to Joseph's imprisonment on false charges.

a. Joseph apparently does not realize the need to avoid tempting her by his presence. Furthermore, he goes into the house at a time when she is alone there. As with his brothers, Joseph, as talented as he is, tends to be overconfident, not thinking about the effect of his actions and presence on others.

b. Potiphar's wife seizes him with greater passion and, when he leaves, has his cloak.

c. As often the case, spurred "love" turns to hatred. Here, as with the violence of Shechem with Dinah, and her brothers against Shechem and the town, the emotion of love, without justice, can easily lead to violence or injury.

- d. She first denounces him to her servants, using the cloak as evidence. Here, she appeals to their national and social pride, referring to Joseph as a "Hebrew slave" and implying that her husband made him lord over them to mock them. Relations do not seem well between her and Potiphar.

- e. There is no evidence about what the servants did or said. Given the lack of any response, one wonders whether they were suspicious of the allegation.

- f. She then recounts the allegation to Potiphar, who is filled with anger. However, the fact that he does not have Joseph executed indicates that he was having doubts about his wife's allegations. He in fact has Joseph in the prison connected to his very house, indicating possibly an intent to continue using his service.

II. In prison, Joseph begins to rise again, both with his natural gifts and his inspiration from God.

A. God leads the chief jailer to recognize Joseph's talents and probably his innocence. And so, as before when Joseph was in favor, then treacherously stripped, arrested and thrown down (into a well), and then raised in favor, here the pattern is repeated. And here again the one in charge (the chief jailer) puts Joseph in charge of everything and all goes well .

B. But then the critical difference begins. Here the chief jailer (unlike Jacob or Potiphar) uses Joseph's talents well; there is thus no more plot against him due to jealousy.

1. At some time after Joseph was imprisoned, the Pharaoh turns against his chief butler (or cupbearer) and chief baker. It is not clear what exactly the offense was that cause the Pharaoh's anger, but there seems to be a connection between

them, for they both deal in food and drink (and in fact in bread and wine, as Melchizedek did.) It is possible that the food they prepared caused disease, or even possibly that there was an attempt at poisoning or other plot.

2. In any case, the chief steward (which could have been Potiphar, his successor, or a servant of the chief steward) put Joseph in charge of them. There may have been an attempt to get to the truth of the matter, especially if Pharaoh suspected one of them of plotting against or trying to poison him, or some other crime, but did not know which of them was guilty.

3. They then dream one dream apparently together. The text presents them as both looking sad together and they respond together to Joseph "We dreamed a dream." It is likely that God was sending a similar message to both of them, but they read it in different ways, possibly because of their different states of mind, especially in regard to guilt or innocence.

4. Joseph goes out of his way to offer help, both in getting them to describe the problem and in the dreams. He begins, here for the first time, plainly to claim power from God.

C. The two dreams are related, but one reflects order and blessing and the other disorder and curses. Joseph is able, through both grace and reason to understand their meaning.

1. The butler both believes Joseph and seems eager to have the dream interpreted, for he goes first.

- a. His dream reflects order, nature and humans in harmony, a likely result of his good conscience and/or the blessings of God . In it a vine and three branches are budding and then soon in blossom. And from them, the butler makes wine and serves it to the Pharaoh

- b. Joseph reads the dream for him as one of being restored by the Pharaoh in three days. Joseph uses the image of the Pharaoh raising his (the butler's head.)

2. Only when he sees the positive interpretation of the butler's dream does the baker come forward. He may well be more nervous about what his dream will reveal.
 - a. His dream reflects disorder, a likely result of a bad conscience and/or God's wrath. In that dream, there is both in the unstable piling up of wealth in three baskets over his head, and an odd scene of birds in one basket pecking at the bread products in the others.
 - b. Joseph reads the dream as one of being hanged by the Pharaoh in three days. Joseph again uses the image of the Pharaoh raising his head, but will the addition of his head raised off his body.

D. Joseph's interpretations come true on the third day, which was the Pharaoh's birthday. Among Jews, and most ancient peoples, personal birthdays were not celebrated, although days of weddings and coronations usually were. The Jewish celebrations focused on great events, such as the Exodus (Passover), the glory of God and giving of the law on Mount Sinai (Feast of Weeks) or the wandering in the desert (Feast of Booths.) See Lev. 23, Duet. 16. But, to the Egyptians, the Pharaoh was a god from his birth, and so the birthday was celebrated.

E. Joseph's interpretations combine reason and the gift of God, a model of devout life generally.

1. Joseph's interpretation did use some reason. Thus, he read the ordered dream and the eagerness of the butler to have the dream interpreted as a sign of innocence, while he read the baker's reluctance and disordered dream as a sign of guilt. He may have reported the results to the chief steward, who may have had something to do with the final sentence, acquittal for the butler and acquittal for the baker. In addition, it made sense that the dreams would come true in three days, given that that is when the Pharaoh's birthday was. See Leon Kaas, [The Beginning of Wisdom](#) 559-61.

2. However, Joseph could not possibly have had the certainty that he demonstrated without God revealing the interpretation to him. Thus, God was guiding him as well to arrive at the truth with certainty.

F. The whole episode seems to go well for Joseph, except that at the end, human weakness and ingratitude betrays him as the butler forgets Joseph's services. Although it might not be the case, Joseph's intervention may have been more than a matter of prediction. A report from him to the chief steward may have helped result in the butler's acquittal.

- The butler's forgetfulness contrasts dramatically with God's continual remembrance. Like the wife of Potiphar, there is a faithlessness, although not as severe as in that case.

III. The final rise of Joseph comes with his interpretation of the dream of the Pharaoh.

A. Chapter 41, and the next account, begins with Pharaoh's dreams, which he knows to form one single message.

1. The dreams involve images that Egyptians would have been familiar with, cows and grains, both fat and thin.

2. It appears that this dream came to Pharaoh only once, but it was extremely powerful. The description is at once very realistic in the setup, but bizarre in the result, with the starved cattle eating the fat ones and the thin ears of wheat eating the fat ones.

3. This narrative does not directly mention the fact that the thin cattle and ears of grain become no thicker, a fact that Pharaoh later adds. See Gen. 41:21, 24. In the dreams, the Pharaoh seemed to wake up right after the eating. Later reflection may have added that detail.

4. It would appear that the Pharaoh's dream had a vividness that he had not experienced recently or perhaps ever. For he is relieved to find that it is not real, but still agitated. And the fact that, until this point the butler has not been reminded of Joseph indicates that there has been no such dream recently.

B. It is rather odd that the Egyptian magicians and sages could not give any interpretation. It is possible that they could not draw a connection, that they could not agree, or that they knew the meaning (seven years of famine), but could propose no solution. They were evidently not used to this situation. About 1200 years later, Daniel would bail out the magicians of Nebuchadnezzar, who threatened to execute them if no one could be found to recount and interpret his dream about a statue made of gold, silver,

bronze, iron and clay. See Dan. 2.

C. At this point the butler speaks up to propose a resolution.

1. He begins by admitting his negligence, which shows some courage and humility.
2. He then recounts accurately what happened, with the obvious implication that the Pharaoh should call upon Joseph.
3. The unnamed butler is evidently a basically decent and intelligent person, but not particularly so. Nevertheless, the future of Egypt and the Chosen People hinges upon his decision to speak up. The smallest of decisions by the least significant people can have the most profound consequences. One who does not believe in the Providence of God must think the world chaotic.

D. The Pharaoh predictably calls Joseph and describes the dream, with the dramatic additions that the thin cattle were the thinnest he had ever seen and that neither they nor the thin stalks grew any fatter.

- Before coming to the Pharaoh, Joseph understandably changes clothes, but he also shaves his beard. The Egyptians, very uncommonly for the Near East, considered it fashionable to have clean shaven faces, which may have been a sign of youth or of otherworldliness. In any case, Joseph up to this point has apparently maintained a certain distance from this practice, but here joins in fully, perhaps indicating a certain full joining in Egyptian culture.

E. Joseph then gives both the interpretation and, critically, the solution to the problem.

1. The well known interpretation is that there will be seven years of historic abundance and seven years of historic famine, during which the years of plenty will be forgotten. Joseph makes it very clear that the events are not by chance but by God's design. He makes no attempt to explain why God would be sending such a pattern of years.

2. Usually when people have plenty, they tend to squander it, thinking it will last forever. Joseph warns Pharaoh, and

by implication all others, to make no such assumption.

3. And so he recommends that a "wise and discerning man" be sent out to command the grain in the land of Egypt. There is a military connotation to his language, for the verb *hemish* implies military action.

F. The Pharaoh is immediately convinced by his interpretation. His confidence may have been due to several factors: (1) Joseph's quickness in giving an interpretation and a solution with no preparation; (2) there was a solution along with a description of the problem; (3) the interpretation may have been consistent with the Pharaoh's own inner feelings and fears; (4) Joseph may have been speaking with a particularly power, as the prophets often did; (5) God may have given the Pharaoh in inner light and conviction that Joseph was speaking the truth; or (6) the Pharaoh may have found the message very convenient because it gave him a reason and opportunity to increase his own power.

G. The Pharaoh not only believes Joseph, but raising him to be second in the kingdom of Egypt, investing him with the insignia of office, the signet ring, robes of office, the chariot of the vizier (the personal representative) and the required homage of the people.

- It may be that the Pharaoh has heard of Joseph's abilities. It may also be that he does not trust his own people, or at least does not want to give any one of them power. Joseph, being an outsider, cannot as easily plot against the Pharaoh, whereas one of his own advisor's might.

- Some scholars have argued that the Pharaoh was more sympathetic to Joseph because he was one of the foreign kings called the Hyksos, who ruled over Egypt from about 1675 – 1575 B.C. They may well have been sympathetic to the Hebrews; and their overthrow may well have been what led to the enslavement of the Hebrews. But the events occurring here seem to be from the late eighteenth century (about 1740-1700) B.C., a little before that time.

H. The Pharaoh also gives Joseph a new name and a high born wife in marriage, confirming his connection to Egypt.

1. The new name Zaphnath-paneah, which means "God lives, He speaks." There may be an implication of hidden truths. The Pharaoh clearly has great respect for Joseph.

2. His wife is plainly high up in Egypt, named Asenath, being belonging to Neith.

- Neith was the goddess associated with the primordial waters of creation, and later with a seamstress who wove together creation.

- Asenath's father was a priest of Heliopolis, the city built for the worship of the sun god, at the time called Atum, later called Re.
- The names imply a return to the primordial state of water and sun that God must tame. The implication could be good insofar as order is being brought to chaos. Or it could be evil insofar as the primordial chaos and, for that matter, paganism, is entering the Chosen People.

3. Within the first seven years, Joseph and Asenath have two children Manasseh and Ephraim, who will become the founders of two half-tribes. Their names reflect forgetting the past and focusing on the fruitfulness now enjoyed. But Joseph will never be able to forget the past afflictions.