

Genesis 40: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Genesis chapter 40 Some time after this the cupbearer of the king of Egypt and his baker committed an offence against their lord, the king of Egypt. And Pharaoh was angry with his two officers, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker, and he put them in the custody of the house of the captain of the guard, in the prison where Joseph was confined.

The captain of the guard appointed Joseph to be with them, and he attended them. They continued for some time in custody. And one night they both dreamed, the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt, who were confined in the prison, each his own dream, and each dream with its own interpretation.

When Joseph came to them in the morning, he saw that they were troubled. So he asked Pharaoh's officers who were with him in custody in his master's house, Why are your faces downcast today?

They said to him, We have had dreams, and there is no one to interpret them. And Joseph said to them, Do not interpretations belong to God? Please tell them to me.

So the chief cupbearer told his dream to Joseph and said to him, In my dream there was a vine before me, and on the vine there were three branches. As soon as it budded, its blossoms shot forth, and the clusters ripened into grapes.

[1 : 15] Pharaoh's cup was in my hand, And I took the grapes and pressed them into Pharaoh's cup, and placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand. Then Joseph said to him, This is its interpretation.

The three branches are three days. In three days, Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your office, And you shall place Pharaoh's cup in his hand, as formerly, when you were his cupbearer.

Only remember me when it is well with you, and please do me the kindness to mention me to Pharaoh, And so get me out of this house. For I was indeed stolen out of the land of the Hebrews, And here also I have done nothing that they should put me into the pit.

When the chief baker saw that the interpretation was favourable, he said to Joseph, I also had a dream. There were three cake baskets on my head, And in the uppermost basket there were all sorts of baked food for Pharaoh, But the birds were eating it out of the basket on my head.

And Joseph answered and said, This is its interpretation. The three baskets are three days. In three days Pharaoh will lift up your head, from you, And hang you on a tree, and the birds will eat the flesh from you.

[2 : 28] On the third day, which was Pharaoh's birthday, He made a feast for all his servants, And lifted up the head of the chief cupbearer, And the head of the chief baker among his servants. He restored the chief cupbearer to his position, And he placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand.

But he hanged the chief baker, as Joseph had interpreted to them. Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, But forgot him. In Genesis chapter 40, Some time has passed since Joseph has been placed into the prison, And he has risen to a position of considerable responsibility within it.

Even when reduced in status, God continues to bless him, And give him favour in the sight of his superiors. And the king's prisoners are placed in the prison. This is the prison run by the captain of the guard.

It's not just for common criminals. And it would seem from the previous chapter, That the captain of the guard, at least initially, Was Potiphar himself. The fact that Potiphar placed Joseph within this prison, And gave him such authority, Or allowed him to rise to such authority, Is probably some indication that he did not take his wife's story at face value.

He knew that there was something more to the picture. Now for some reason, The cupbearer and the chief baker had offended Pharaoh in some way, And they're placed into the prison until they'll be dealt with at some point.

[3 : 50] This suggests that there's a crisis of food in Egypt. These are not just regular servants, But figures presumably with ritual roles to perform, And significant tasks to oversee.

They're overseeing wine, And they're overseeing bread. The cupbearer is the one who's responsible for keeping the wine and vineyards of Pharaoh operational, To give him his fill of wine, And perhaps also to serve as some sort of close advisor to Pharaoh.

The chief baker is the one who should oversee the bread production of Egypt. And these characters may stand for something more. There's a food crisis in Egypt. The chief people tasked with the bread and wine of Egypt are not up for the task.

Now as we go through the story, We'll see that Joseph becomes, as it were, the baker of Egypt. The chief baker. The one charged with maintaining the production of bread.

He also becomes the cupbearer. He has the cup of divination a few chapters later. So maybe we should see some sort of foreshadowing here. There are paired dreams.

[4 : 58] And we've already noted the fact that there are many pairs within the story of Joseph and Genesis more generally. Often we'll see two characters juxtaposed with each other or associated with each other in some way.

In the story of Joseph, we've already seen twins. We've seen Perez and Zerah. We've seen Joseph and Judah. We've seen two temptation scenes. And we also have three sets of paired dreams.

We have the paired dreams of Joseph earlier on in chapter 37. We have the dreams here. And then we have the dreams in the next chapter, the dreams of Pharaoh.

And these dreams should be connected. Each of these pairs, the dreams belong together. The paired dreams of the two royal officials here invite us to compare and contrast their fate.

And also associate them in certain ways. There are three sets of three within the dream of the cupbearer. Three branches. Three sets of growth.

[5 : 58] Budding. Blossoms coming forth. And clusters ripening into grapes. There are three actions. Taking grapes. Pressing them into the cup. And putting the cup in Pharaoh's hand. So we see pairs are important.

But also threes. And threes and pairs and sevens are all important within the Joseph story. And so pay attention to numerical patterns. To certain pairings.

To things that are presented as triples. These are all patterns that can maybe help us to recognize structures that are playing out on the wider scale. Three is important.

Once you've worked out that the three corresponds to days, much of the rest would make sense. There's a temporal sequence in growth. From budding to blossoms coming forth to clusters ripening into grapes.

And that suggests a quick passage of time. And a movement into life. It's a coming forth of life. Joseph presumably knows that his Pharaoh's birthday in three days' time is a big state occasion.

[7 : 00] There are most likely rumors and stories going around the prison of what's going to happen on that great day. What the festivities and celebrations will involve. And presumably Joseph recognizes there are some important seats empty.

There are some places in the Pharaoh's cabinet that have not been filled. And so he needs to deal with that for his birthday presumably. As there will be state occasions and other things associated with it that need people in those offices.

These aren't rebels or common criminals. They've displeased the king in some way. But they have an important role to perform. And Pharaoh does not, in their absence, have the right servants that he needs.

Joseph declares that the chief cupbearer will have his head lifted up. The king will summon him and restore him to his office. And the head lifting up suggests his summoning and also some sort of elevation in status.

Having performed an important favor for the chief cupbearer, Joseph asks something in return. That the chief cupbearer will remember him when he comes back to his office.

[8 : 05] And he speaks of his own situation. That he has been stolen from the land of the Hebrews. His position there is not as one of the people of the Egyptians. But as a foreigner who has been mistreated.

And there's no reason for him to be in the pit, as he calls it. I've noted previously that the association of the dungeon with a pit. The same word being used as the pit into which he is thrown by his brothers in chapter 37.

Suggests that we're supposed to hold those two things alongside each other. To see the stripping of his garment and his placing into the pit in chapter 37. As parallel with what happens in chapter 39.

And he calls for the chief cupbearer to deal with his situation by bringing him to Pharaoh's mind. Pharaoh presumably doesn't know about him. But he wants Pharaoh to hear about his case and perhaps act to rectify it.

Having heard the interpretation of the dream of the chief cupbearer. The chief baker is emboldened to ask about his dream. Once again there is the significance of the number three.

[9 : 08] Three baskets. Three days. On his head. His head will be taken up. The cupbearer sees a tree before him. The baker will be hung upon a tree.

And the birds will eat his flesh like they eat the bread. They're twins. Both will have their heads lifted up. And we see them both being described as having their heads lifted up.

But one is lifted up in a positive way. And the other lifted up in a negative way. As often in the story of Genesis. There are pairings of characters. That we're supposed to read alongside each other.

To see for instance the similarities in the story of Abraham's entertaining of the angels. And Lot's entertaining of the angels. And then to see the differences. Likewise here there's a pairing.

And we're supposed to see the similarities and the differences between the two characters. As Christians reading this story we may notice other things. There are two criminals alongside Joseph.

[10 : 04] In the situation of judgment. One will be lifted up. The other will be hung on a tree and finally destroyed. The chief cupbearer is restored. And Joseph in a sense asks him to remember him when he comes into the kingdom.

In the story of Christ. Christ is crucified with two criminals. One on the right. One on the left. One is finally judged. And the other is remembered when Christ comes into his kingdom.

That theme of remembering. In which a prisoner asks another prisoner. Who will be raised up to a favourable situation. To remember him. Is something that connects this story with the story of Christ.

Of course Christ remembers the person who's crucified with him. Whereas the cupbearer fails to remember Joseph. And it's only later on in the story that Joseph actually comes to mind for him.

Then there's deliverance from the pit in both stories. Joseph will be delivered from the pit. And in this story. Joseph will later be delivered from the pit. Also notice that the raising up from the pit for the chief cupbearer.

[11 : 10] Occurs on the third day. And again that would be a connection with the story of the gospels. We might see in the forgetting of Joseph. A connection with the beginning of the book of Exodus as well.

When a pharaoh arises who does not remember Joseph. In that case. As well as in this. It may seem as if a divinely given destiny that had been declared previously.

Had failed to come about. Following through the story of Joseph. There's that movement from the brash young teenager who has the dreams. And declares with great assurance that his brothers and his father and mother are going to bow down to him.

To a figure who has been knocked back. Time and time again. He has been doing faithful things. He goes on his father's mission to his brothers. Faithful as a son. And yet is thrown into a pit and sold into slavery.

He is faithful to his master Potiphar. And yet as a result to Potiphar's wife. Is thrown into the prison. And then in the prison he's faithful. And does everything that he should do.

[12 : 11] Rises to influence within the prison. Helps out these prisoners. And yet the very prisoner he's helped. Fails to remember him. When he comes to a position of influence.

Where he could actually reciprocate. And so Joseph can understandably feel a bit aggrieved. He can feel that maybe this destiny thing is not real after all.

Maybe God has forgotten me. Maybe I'm just stuck in this pit for the rest of my life. And there's no more hope for me. But yet that does not seem to be the case. Joseph time and again draws attention to God as the one that he is looking towards.

So how can I do this wickedness against God? That is the ultimate answer that he gives to Potiphar's wife when she tempts him. Not primarily about his master. Not primarily about his own honour.

But about his relationship with God. And here again he draws attention to the fact that it is God who has the interpretations of dreams.

[13 : 12] And so whatever his wisdom. Whatever his abilities. It's ultimately God that he looks towards. And so that sense of God being active in his situation.

Even when he's in this lowest state. Even when it seems that his destiny has been thwarted in the most complete way possible. Is one of the most remarkable features of the story of Joseph.

And at the end of the story when he can say that you meant it for evil but God meant it for good. Seeing in all these negative apparent twists of his fate. These chance or small events that all conspired against him seemingly.

He can see in each one of those the hand of God charting his course. And he's learned to be faithful to God ultimately. I've mentioned the theme of loyalty that runs throughout Joseph's life.

And that theme of loyalty ultimately focuses upon God. It's his loyalty to God even in situations where there's no reason apparently to be loyal to God.

[14 : 11] When it seems as though he's been stripped of the destiny that God gave him. Even at that low point he can look to God and see God as being in control of his situation. A question to consider.

In the story of Joseph there are many parallels with other stories that we find elsewhere in scripture. Things like the story of Daniel for instance. Another person who interprets dreams in the court of a king.

And rises to high office within the land as a result. But the character I want to encourage you to think about is the character of Mordecai. Mordecai is involved in unmasking a plot in which there are two royal officials who conspire against the king and displease him.

And he brings them to light, tells Esther, and Esther brings it to the knowledge of the king. There are also ways in which the events in Potiphar's house are mirrored in the story of Mordecai.

Mordecai is asked day after day why he is not going to bow down or pay homage to Haman. And that expression of asking him day after day, an expression that we see in verse 4 of chapter 3 of Esther, is found one other place in scripture.

[15 : 19] In the story of Potiphar's wife's temptation of Joseph. Similar themes may be in play. In the story of Joseph, he is tempted to keep favour with his master by sleeping with his master's wife, the one thing that is forbidden to him within the house.

In the story of Mordecai, he is tempted to bow down to Haman, who seems to have pretensions upon the king's office. The one thing that Haman does not have a right to. Haman has been elevated to extremely high office, but he does not seem satisfied.

He seems to want to take the office of the king and the status and the honour and the glory of the king for himself. And that is one thing that Mordecai is not willing to give him.

So maybe there are similarities there. I would like you to think about some other ways in which Mordecai and Joseph might be similar. And how this particular connection might be filled out.

And then consider what that might teach us about each of the characters as they are compared and contrasted with each other.