

The Family of Abraham - Part 31—Pharaoh's Dreams

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[0 : 00] Welcome back to this, the 31st in my series on the story of the family of Abraham. Today we're looking at chapter 41 of the book of Genesis, which concerns the two dreams of Pharaoh, Joseph's interpretation of them, and Joseph's stratospheric rise to status within the land of Egypt.

The story begins with a reference to a particular time. It came to pass at the end of two full years that Pharaoh had a dream. Now, those two full years are dated from his birthday in the previous chapter.

That birthday was the time of release for the butler and the baker, although the baker was hung as a result of the birthday.

This occasion is then the third birthday, presumably, around that sort of time. And that suggests that maybe there's something in the dreams of the butler and the baker that was a message to Joseph himself.

That at the end of three days, the first birthday, the second birthday, the third birthday, he himself would be released too. Maybe. That's a possibility. And again, we see themes of three days are important within the story of Joseph.

[1 : 12] They'll be mentioned again, at least once more. And thinking about this in terms of Christ's resurrection, there are some obvious parallels there. He sees in this dream, he has two dreams.

Again, two witnesses, dreams about the same event, much as we've seen in chapter 37 in Joseph's dreams, and in chapter 40 in the dreams of the butler and the baker. Here he has a dream with seven cows coming out of the river, fine-looking and fat, feeding in the meadow.

And the word for meadow, we're not entirely sure what it means. It could mean the swamp or marsh or reeds by the edge of the river. It could mean a number of different things, and we'll get back to that in a moment.

And then after them, seven other cows come up behind the mouth of the river, ugly and gaunt, standing by the other cows on the bank of the river, and then they ate up the fine-looking cows. And Pharaoh awakes.

Then he dreams a second time, and it's seven heads of corn coming up on one stalk, plump and good. And then seven thin heads, blighted by the east winds, sprung up after them.

[2 : 18] And the seven thin heads devoured the seven plump and full heads. So Pharaoh awoke, and indeed it was a dream. Again, we have some interesting imagery in these dreams.

If you think back to Joseph's own dreams, there are some odd things, there are some odd images within that. The sun, moon, and eleven stars bowing down to him. What does it look like for the sun, moon, and eleven stars to bow down?

Well, whatever it looks like, that's what Joseph saw. And here we have the description of the grain coming up, and the heads of grain being devoured by the other heads of grain.

What does that look like? I'm not entirely sure, but it's something that is clearly charged with significance. The fact that there are two dreams. This is not an accident. Pharaoh can see that these two dreams are related to each other.

There's something significant in the way that these two dreams occur at the same time. They're two witnesses to the same reality. So this is not just an odd dream that might need interpretation of some kind, but it's not that significant.

[3 : 28] These are two witnesses to something significant, and he knows that there's something important going on, and he needs to get to the bottom of it. And he wakes up in the morning and his spirit is troubled.

He calls to all the magicians of Egypt and its wise men, and there's no one who can interpret it for Pharaoh. As we see in this chapter, and then elsewhere in the story of Moses going into Egypt with Aaron, and then in the story of Daniel, the magicians and the wise men are people who often fail to interpret, fail to overcome the power of God.

And God proves the wisdom and the power of his servants over these figures as the foil. But then you also see in the story of Daniel that Daniel is placed over the magicians.

And later on in this story, we'll see that Joseph is raised to a position of status, even within the religious order of Egypt itself. And so he has influence over that whole religious structure.

These two dreams are ominous, and obviously the word is getting around the palace. And the chief butler speaks to Pharaoh. Again, we see the chief butler, obviously, is a man with the ear of Pharaoh.

[4 : 49] He's close to him. And so he hears this sort of thing. And Pharaoh is privy to Pharaoh's intimate dreams in these sorts of occasions.

If Pharaoh's had something that's worried him, the butler knows about it. So he's obviously an important figure. And he, at this point, recalls Joseph.

And he tells Pharaoh that there was a young Hebrew man with us in the dungeon, a servant of the captain of the guard. And we told him, and he interpreted our dreams for us.

To each man, he interpreted according to his own dream. And it came to pass, as it was said. And so Pharaoh sends for Joseph. He's being pulled out of the pit. And they brought him hastily out of the dungeon.

Again, the word here is pit. And he shaved, changed his clothing, and came to Pharaoh. We're seeing something of a reversal of themes here. In chapter 37, he's placed in the pit.

[5 : 48] His garment is taken from him. And he's placed in the pit. Now he's taken out of the pit. And he has a garment put upon him, a new garment. And he's returning to a father figure.

Pharaoh, who is like a father figure. And Jacob was the one who sent him away. Pharaoh relates his dream to Joseph.

And when he tells the dream, he stresses the negative aspects of it. So it's not so much the counterbalance of good and bad. He is really concerned about what do these ugly cows mean.

It's what he focuses upon. The seven cows, fine-looking cows, feed in the meadow. And then he emphasizes just how ugly and gaunt these other cows are.

Such ugliness I have never seen in all the land of Egypt. And then no one would have known that they had eaten them. For they were just as ugly as at the beginning. So I awoke. And then he talks about the second dream.

[6 : 48] And all the magicians have not been able to explain it to him. And Joseph, having heard the dream, is able to interpret it more or less straight away. And once again, the numbers are significant in terms of time periods.

Now, how would he interpret that? Maybe because we're talking about successions of things. So it's not as if you have these two things alongside each other.

The fine cows and then the ugly cows at the same time. Rather, they come in succession. And maybe that suggests to Joseph that there is a succession being mentioned here.

And the fact that these two things are together. You have the fertility of Egypt came from the Nile. Not from the rains so much as in other lands, but from the Nile.

And so the cows, which is a symbol of Egypt, among other things, arise out of the Nile. And they're associated with the fertility of the Nile as it floods its banks.

[7 : 51] Maybe that's part of what's referenced here. And then also you have the grain that was associated with particular harvests.

The succession of these things suggests that there is some sort of cycle, yearly cycle, that is going away. And I would imagine that that's the sort of way that Joseph interpreted it.

The seven years and then the seven years of plenty and then the seven years of famine. The seven good heads are seven years. The dreams are one. And the seven thin and ugly cows which came up after them are seven years.

And the seven empty heads blighted by the east wind are seven years of famine. Note that there are two problems here. There's the problem with the Nile and there's the problem with the blighting of the east wind.

So there's a problem with the Nile and there's a problem with the sun. The problem with the waters below and the heavens above. And this is also a statement about the source of Israel's life.

[8 : 58] The Nile and the sun guard. Both of them seem to be failing at this point. And there's a crisis that maybe is a religious crisis along with a crisis of food.

It presents a failure of these two key gods within the Egyptian pantheon. Maybe that's part of what's going on. And then he interprets the dream to Pharaoh.

And he goes beyond interpretation. He suggests action to be taken. The plenty will not be known in the land because of the famine following. It will be very severe. And this is established by God.

It's been repeated twice. Precisely because this is established by God and God will bring it to pass. That there is a two-fold witness to this sure event.

That two-fold witness is something that... When we look through the story of Joseph, there are interesting themes in Joseph's story of providence. We see repeated patterns.

[10 : 02] We see the patterns of going into the pit and being brought up out of the pit. We see things like that you meant it for evil but God meant it for good.

And when he talks to his brothers later on. Or you see something like this. God has established something. A period of time. Now, think. It's 14 years as well.

How long has Joseph been in his position? This is coming into presumably the start of the 14th year. Or we maybe can have some parallels here with the story of Jacob, his father.

That Jacob, his time in the land with Laban and the coming of the 14th year and what that signified. Or maybe it's associated with the birth of Isaac, 13 years after the birth of Ishmael.

Don't know. But these are numbers that occur on a number of occasions. 13 and 14. So, maybe there's something going on there. Pay attention to the numbers anyway.

[11 : 10] Because often there are things going on. He suggests that Pharaoh appoint officers over the land. Collecting one-fifth of the produce of the land of Egypt in the seven plentiful years.

And alongside that, select a discerning and wise man and set him over the entire land of Egypt. So, have one wise man overseeing the whole process and then set officers over the land.

And it says, to collect one-fifth of the produce of the land of Egypt in the seven plentiful years. Not entirely sure what that means. It might not be referring to collecting one-fifth.

But dividing the country into fifths. As a sort of military rule. Later on we'll see that Israel is divided into companies of fives or fifties.

As they leave Egypt and enter the promised land as well. On both of those occasions. That it's a sort of military ordering. So, he's maybe suggesting putting the nation under martial law.

[12 : 09] Later on there will be a suggestion of taxation. But that comes at a later point. So, at this point I think maybe it's military rule that he's referring to. And the gathering of the food presumably means don't sell it outside Egypt.

Don't engage in the sort of trade that you generally engage in. But collect the food within the land. Ensure that it is all placed in storehouses and preserved.

And so it's gathered for the good. Join the good years. And stored up under the authority of Pharaoh. And kept in the cities. And then that's a reserve for the years of famine. Pharaoh is very impressed with this advice.

And says, can we find such a one as this? A man in whom is the spirit of God. And then points out that, well, all the wise men and the magicians of Egypt have failed to interpret his dream.

Who's interpreted his dream in this way? It's Joseph. And so, Joseph would seem to be the natural person. Wiser than all the other people in the land. They've just had a test.

[13 : 11] Everyone else has failed. Joseph succeeded. So, why not make him the person to oversee? Even in his interpretation of the dream. He moved beyond interpretation into prudent advice.

So, there's a suggestion. He's probably the guy we're looking for. And Joseph is told by Pharaoh. I've set you over all the land of Egypt. And he takes the signet ring off his hand.

Put it on Joseph's hand. And he clothed him in garments of fine linen. And put a gold chain around his neck. Had him ride in the second chariot which he had. And they cried out before him, bow the knee.

So, he set him over all the land of Egypt. Read this. And think of what this reminds you of. There are a few things that might remind you of. It might remind you of the story of Mordecai.

As Mordecai is blessed by King Ahasuerus. Who says, what shall be done to the man who the king delights to honour. And dress him up in the finery of the king.

[14:06] And royal robe which the king has worn. Royal crest placed on his head. And then led by one of the noble princes on horseback.

And everyone have to bow before him. And say this is what is done to the man who the king delights to honour. Later on we'll see Mordecai the Jew.

It was second to King Ahasuerus. And was great among the Jews. And was well received by the multitude of his brethren. Seeking the good of his people. And speaking peace to all his kindred. So again we see someone raised to high status.

And in a similar sort of situation. Daniel has a similar thing happen as well. Under King Darius. So these are examples of wise Jews who are raised to power.

Another example though. Which is maybe an inverse. Is the story of Judah. Where Judah has his signet and cord taken from him.

[15:05] And his staff. These symbols of rule are removed from him. He later receives them back as he confesses. But Joseph has a different route to receive these things.

He's been stripped of his garment. His garment of many colours. Which is associated with the rule that his father gave him. But now he's given something different. By a new father figure.

He's given new robes. Priestly vestments perhaps. He's given gold chain.

And he's given a signet ring. So all these things might draw our mind back to the story of Judah.

And what happened in his case. Move further on through this.

And you'll see that he is placed in a position of authority that's very similar to the position of authority he had in Potiphar's house. Or in the prison. He's placed over everything.

[16:03] Overseeing everything. No one else is above him. Even Pharaoh doesn't know what is being done beyond. He trusts Joseph with everything.

Without your consent no man may lift his hand or foot in all the land of Egypt. And he's given a new name. Zaphnath-Panea.

Presumably God speaks and he lives. There's the suggestion that's given. And he's given a wife.

The daughter of Potipharah. Priest of On. And Joseph is placed over all the land of Egypt.

He's preparing it as the wise man. And then presumably has lots of officers under his rule. To manage things. Now he's a man who has great gifts. But when you look at the story of Joseph.

You can see that these gifts have certain limitations to them. These are the sort of gifts of administration for the second in command. These are the gifts that you see in the person who can keep the prison.

[17:03] Who can keep the house of his master. Who can serve under the king. Pharaoh. All these sorts of things. He can be also the firstborn of his father.

And play that role. And in all of these roles there's questions of loyalty. He is very loyal. And the question is. Is he too loyal? Is he someone who's able to stand for justice.

Even when it is something that might go against his master. And that question is one that will niggle a bit. And it's worth keeping that in mind.

Is he someone who can stand against his master. When the time comes. If it's necessary. Is his loyalty absolute. Now we've seen. His loyalty is very strong. That he will be loyal.

Even when it's a disadvantage to him. But is his loyalty just an absolute loyalty. A total loyalty. That does not really brook exceptions. And the question of what gifts come to the forefront at different stages of history is interesting.

[18:03] In the philosophy of the Hebrew scriptures. Is Yoram Huzoni makes some really interesting points about this. Where he explores the characters of the brothers. Where you see Levi and Simeon.

And their association with zeal and violence. And the way that you have Judah. Who's associated with repentance. And he's a leader of the brothers. And Joseph has a different set of characteristics.

That are associated with him. And his associated characteristic is loyalty. This complete commitment. And this high competence and organization.

But that high competence and organization ultimately creates a system that can turn against Israel. And at that point you need the Levites. You need the Levites who are characterized by zeal.

And you need Judah who's characterized by strength. And the ability to repent. And so it's a very interesting exploration in different character traits.

[19:01] Different sorts of persons. And where they come to their fall. So you don't want Judah. You don't want Joseph as the king. You want Judah as the king. But Joseph can be a very good administrator under the king.

Looking through this further. He has the seven plentiful years. And these plentiful years are not just plentiful for the land. They're plentiful for Joseph too. During this year he gathers grain as the sand of the sea.

Recalling the promises made to Abraham. And he has two sons before the year of famine came. Manasseh.

God has made me forget all my toil and my father's house. And the second Ephraim. For God has caused me to be fruitful in the land of my affliction. Now think. He hasn't sent any message home. Quite possibly he believes that his father is responsible for putting him. And sending him over to his brothers. And leading him into Egypt. He has the opportunity to send message home I presume.

[19:58] But he doesn't. So maybe this is his forgetting of his father's house. It's his sense that now I am the firstborn of the king of Egypt. I've got a new situation.

I'm not just the firstborn as a servant as it were of the house. The chief servant of the house of Potiphar. Nor am I just the man who organizes everything under the keep of the prison.

Now I am second in the land of Egypt on the viceroy. And incidentally we do have references and images from. And even garments and other things. Or images of garments associated with the appointment of the viceroy in Egypt.

So these are not things that were just left to depend upon this text. We can see these sorts of things in museums. And so the seven years of plenty which were in the land of Egypt end.

And then the seven years of famine begin. And all the land of Egypt is famished. And the people come to Pharaoh for bread. And he sends them to Joseph. And Joseph opens the storehouses and sold to the Egyptians.

[21:00] And other countries come to Egypt to buy grain. Now is there anything else going on in this story? Is there anything else that we can learn from the dreams of Pharaoh?

Now I've mentioned that there is a reversal in the status of Joseph. We can see a sort of symmetry in his life. It begins with him.

Well you have him being taken out of the pit. A new garment put upon him. Now that goes back to a garment being taken from him. And then him being put in the pit. Then you have him returning to the father figure.

Returning to Pharaoh. Or going to Pharaoh. And then you have telling or hearing the two dreams. And just before he left there were two dreams that he related to his father.

And so there's further symmetry here. And then he was raised to great status. And we saw him given the coat of many colours. The status of the firstborn as it were of the house.

[21:58] So there's a symmetry to his life. But in that dream of Pharaoh. Is there anything else that might suggest a symmetry? Rabbi David Forman has suggested this.

And I think it's a very interesting suggestion. I'm not sure what to make of it. But seven ugly. Seven beautiful cows. Seven ugly cows. And then the first being swallowed by the second.

And they're grazing in the meadow or the swamp. Now the words there. If you look. The grazing. It could mean shepherding. And the word for the meadow or swamp.

Could mean. Or could suggest. With their brothers. And that's where we see Joseph at the beginning of the story. Shepherding with his brothers. And the ugly cows.

The racote cows. They're similar to the description of Leah's eyes. It's not quite the same word. But the same sound pretty much. And it's reminiscent of what?

[22:59] It's reminiscent of Joseph being swallowed by his brothers. You have the seven beautiful cows. And then you have the seven ugly cows.

And the seven ugly cows swallow the beautiful cows. It seems as if he's been swallowed up by his brothers. Now why would you have seven? Think back. Where have we seen seven years and seven years before?

In the story of Jacob in Laban's house. Serves seven years for the beautiful Rachel. And the way that Rachel is described.

The way that Joseph is described. Both of them are described as beautiful. And it's the same way that the cows are described. They're the beautiful cows. And then the ugly cows.

They're described in ways similar. In words similar to the description of Leah's eyes. It's playing upon the word perhaps. And so you have seven years that flow by as if just a few days.

[24 : 00] As Jacob serves for Rachel. And then those years are blighted as it were by the east wind. As you have all of them being emptied of significance.

As he's given Leah instead of Rachel. And he has to serve again for another seven years. And he's reduced to a different level of servitude. So seven beautiful years.

Swallowed by seven ugly years. And maybe there's something within the story of Joseph. That he was supposed to see in that. In the same way as he could hear the stories of the dreams.

Of the butler and the baker. And see something that resembled his situation. Maybe he can do something like that with Pharaoh's dream as well. Maybe Pharaoh's dream tells him something. Maybe it tells him that there is a swallowing up. He's swallowed up the beautiful cow. As Benjamin and Rachel and Joseph.

[24 : 57] It seems like that whole. All of Rachel's. All of Rachel's side of the family has been swallowed up. By the ugly cows. And now that's all that's left.

And it just seems such a tragedy. Those seven years that Jacob served. Have all gone to waste. What's happened to them? They've been swallowed up by those seven ugly years.

And maybe that's something that he hears in this. But then what's the response? That the seven beautiful years. Provide for the seven ugly years.

And through it together get through. And maybe there's a message there. For what Joseph is supposed to do. Maybe he would think back at this point. To his own dreams. And think maybe there is something more going on in my own dreams.

Maybe I should recall those. Maybe there's something that suggests. That I'm going to be the means. Of blessing my brothers. Not just ruling over them.

[25 : 57] One other thing to notice. He's 30 years of age. When he stands before Pharaoh king of Egypt. 30 years of age. Associated with coming into a new sort of authority.

It's associated with priests. They've done their service at the age of 30. Christ begins his ministry at the age of 30. And other figures like David and others. Have significant starts at the age of 30.

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