

Genesis 41: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 11 February 2020

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[0 : 00] Genesis chapter 41 And he fell asleep and dreamed a second time.

And behold, seven ears of grain, plump and good, were growing on one stalk. And behold, after them sprouted seven ears, thin and blighted by the east wind. And the thin ears swallowed up the seven plump full ears.

And Pharaoh awoke, and behold, it was a dream. So in the morning his spirit was troubled, and he sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt and all its wise men.

Pharaoh told them his dreams, but there was none who could interpret them to Pharaoh. Then the chief cupbearer said to Pharaoh, I remember my offenses today. When Pharaoh was angry with his servants and put me and the chief baker in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, we dreamed on the same night.

He and I, each having a dream with its own interpretation. A young Hebrew was there with us, a servant of the captain of the guard. When we told him he interpreted our dreams to us, giving an interpretation to each man according to his dream.

[1 : 32] And as he interpreted to us, so it came about. I was restored to my office, and the baker was hanged. Then Pharaoh sent and called Joseph, and they quickly brought him out of the pit.

And when he had shaved himself and changed his clothes, he came in before Pharaoh. And Pharaoh said to Joseph, I have had a dream, and there is no one who can interpret it.

I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream, you can interpret it. Joseph answered Pharaoh, It is not in me. God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer. Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, Behold, in my dream I was standing on the banks of the Nile.

Seven cows, plump and attractive, came up out of the Nile, and fed in the reed grass. Seven other cows came up after them, poor and very ugly and thin, such as I had never seen in all the land of Egypt.

And the thin, ugly cows ate up the first seven plump cows. But when they had eaten them, no one would have known that they had eaten them, for they were still as ugly as at the beginning. Then I awoke.

[2 : 37] I also saw in my dream seven ears growing on one stalk, full and good. Seven ears, withered, thin, and blighted by the east wind, sprouted after them. And the thin ears swallowed up the seven good ears.

And I told it to the magicians. But there was no one who could explain it to me. Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, The dreams of Pharaoh are one. God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do.

The seven good cows are seven years. And the seven good ears are seven years. The dreams are one. The seven lean and ugly cows that came up after them are seven years. And the seven empty ears, blighted by the east wind, are also seven years of famine.

It is as I told Pharaoh. God has shown to Pharaoh what he is about to do. There will come seven years of great plenty throughout all the land of Egypt. But after them there will arise seven years of famine.

And all the plenty will be forgotten in the land of Egypt. The famine will consume the land. And the plenty will be unknown in the land by reason of the famine that will follow. For it will be very severe.

[3 : 41] And the doubling of Pharaoh's dream means that the thing is fixed by God. And God will shortly bring it about. Now therefore, let Pharaoh select a discerning and wise man, and set him over the land of Egypt.

Let Pharaoh proceed to appoint overseers over the land, and take one-fifth of the produce of the land of Egypt during the seven plentiful years. And let them gather all the food of these good years that are coming, and store up grain under the authority of Pharaoh for food in the cities, and let them keep it.

That food shall be a reserve for the land against the seven years of famine that are to occur in the land of Egypt, so that the land may not perish through the famine. This proposal pleased Pharaoh and all his servants.

And Pharaoh said to his servants, Can we find a man like this, in whom is the Spirit of God? Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, Since God has shown you all this, there is none so discerning and wise as you are.

You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command. Only as regards the throne will I be greater than you. And Pharaoh said to Joseph, See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt.

[4 : 49] Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his hand, and put it on Joseph's hand, and clothed him in garments of fine linen, and put a gold chain about his neck. And he made him ride in his second chariot.

And they called out before him, Bow the knee! Thus he set him over all the land of Egypt. Moreover Pharaoh said to Joseph, I am Pharaoh, and without your consent no one shall lift up hand or foot in all the land of Egypt.

And Pharaoh called Joseph's name Zaphonath-Panaia. And he gave him in marriage Asenath, the daughter of Potipharah, priest of On. So Joseph went out over the land of Egypt.

Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh, king of Egypt. And Joseph went out from the presence of Pharaoh and went through all the land of Egypt. During the seven plentiful years the earth produced abundantly.

And he gathered up all the food of these seven years, which occurred in the land of Egypt, and put the food in the cities. He put in every city the food from the fields around it. And Joseph stored up grain in great abundance, like the sand of the sea, until he ceased to measure it, for it could not be measured.

[6 : 00] Before the year of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph. Joseph, Asenath, the daughter of Potipharah, priest of On, bore them to him. Joseph called the name of the firstborn Manasseh, for, he said, God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house.

The name of the second he called Ephraim, for God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction. The seven years of plenty that occurred in the land of Egypt came to an end, and the seven years of famine began to come.

As Joseph had said, there was famine in all lands, but in all the land of Egypt there was bread. When all the land of Egypt was famished, the people cried to Pharaoh for bread.

Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, Go to Joseph. What he says to you, do. So when the famine had spread over all the land, Joseph opened all the storehouses and sold to the Egyptians, for the famine was severe in the land of Egypt.

Moreover, all the earth came to Egypt to Joseph to buy grain. Because the famine was severe over all the earth. Genesis 41 begins two whole years after the events of the previous chapter.

[7 : 08] That's two full years dated from the birthday of Pharaoh. Is this the third birthday? The third day of Pharaoh? When he interpreted the dreams of the chief cupbearer and the chief baker, three days was the day in which they would be raised up or destroyed.

In the same way, maybe this was a message to Joseph about his own fate. At the beginning of the third year, on that third day, as it were, he would be raised up.

This is probably not something to put much weight upon, but it's a possibility. There are two dreams that Pharaoh has about the same event. Once again, two witnesses to the same reality.

And these dreams both have a troubling, ominous significance to Pharaoh. He knows that they are important, but he does not know what they mean. And there are odd images here.

What does it look like for thin ears of grain to swallow up fat ones? These are not things that we would commonly visualize. In the same way, what does it look for the sun, moon and eleven stars to bow down to Joseph?

[8 : 12] Again, it's not entirely clear. But Pharaoh knows that these things are important and that they probably relate to the same reality. He summons his magicians and wise men and they fail to interpret.

In various places in scripture, we see the failure of the magicians and the wise men. And they provide a foil for the success of the faithful and righteous person, the person who looks to God for the true interpretation, rather than to human skill or magic or to the false gods of the nations.

Having seen the failure of the magicians and the wise men, the chief cupbearer suddenly remembers Joseph. Joseph is the one who is able to interpret his dream and the chief baker's dream.

Maybe he will be able to help in Pharaoh's situation too. The chief cupbearer has the ear of Pharaoh, is privy to his dreams. He's obviously a high official. And there is a reversal of themes here as Joseph is summoned.

He's given firstborn status in chapter 37. He relates his two dreams. He then has garments taken from him and is placed into the pit. But now he's taken from the pit.

[9 : 22] His garments are changed. He interprets two dreams. And then he receives firstborn status, returning to a father figure. There is a there and back again pattern to Joseph's life.

Pharaoh underlines the negative aspects of the images that he saw in his dream in the retelling. The ugliness of the cows, for instance, particularly stands out to him. Ugliness that he had not seen anywhere else in Egypt.

Joseph, however, seems to be able to interpret the dreams immediately. Time periods are important for understanding what's going on here. There's a yearly cycle that is going awry. There's a succession of events.

There's seven followed by seven. And the fertility of Egypt came from the Nile. The cows come from the Nile. There's a yearly cycle here, but there is some sort of failure within it.

There's a problem with the Nile. And then there's a problem with the blighting of the east wind and the sun. So there's the failure of two key orders. The Nile and the sun.

[10 : 22] This might be seen as a judgment also upon Egypt's gods. The key things that they look to for fertility have broken down. And maybe there's a religious crisis here.

But God is proving his supremacy, first of all, in pointing out these things that are going to take place. But also in the fact that he is in control of all these orders of reality.

Joseph goes beyond interpretation to suggest action. A particular policy that should be taken. Overseers should be placed over the land. And a fifth of the produce should be collected.

Or either a fifth of the country should be divided into fifths. Maybe there's some suggestion of martial law here. But the food must be gathered. It's presumably to be ensured it's not sold outside of the land.

And the food that is taxed is brought in and gathered in these great granaries. But yet, after Joseph has given this interpretation of the dream, Pharaoh looks around.

[11 : 21] He sees his failed magicians and wise men. And then he sees Joseph. And it becomes obvious to him that Joseph is the one who has the most prudence and wisdom to be able to carry out this plan.

He's the one who gave the suggestion of the policy. He seems to be the person to look to to administer it. This wisdom that Joseph has comes from divine revelation. But also involves prudent administration.

We've seen that he's been given the spirit of the Lord that equips him to prosper in the house of his father, in the house of Pharaoh, in the house of the captain of the guard, the prison.

And now he's going to prosper in Pharaoh's service as well. He's someone who has been given wisdom and is able to enact wisdom under the rule of someone else.

All of this maybe draws our mind back to the very beginning of the Bible. The story of the Garden of Eden, where man and woman were supposed to learn wisdom within the context of the garden, under God's instruction, and then having learned wisdom in that context to move out into the world.

[12 : 23] Here we have one who is faithfully exemplifying wisdom under an authority figure. And Joseph is the one in whom we see this theme of wisdom that's within the book of Genesis come to its fuller expression.

He's given a signet ring, garments of fine linen, a gold chain, and is made to ride around the second chariot in the land and have people call out before him bow the knee.

Now, what does this remind us of? Maybe of a few things. Might remind us of Daniel under Darius. Also might remind us of Mordecai in chapter 8, verse 15 of the book of Esther.

Then Mordecai went out from the presence of the king in royal robes of blue and white, with a great golden crown and a robe of fine linen and purple. And the city of Susa shouted and rejoiced.

It's a very similar pattern that we see here. But there's something else nearer to hand. Maybe it connects with the story of Judah. Judah is someone who loses his signet, his cord, and his staff.

[13 : 27] Signs of office. Joseph is stripped of everything. But here he receives a signet ring, garments of fine linen, and a gold chain.

Things that connect with the signet ring of Judah and the cord that he has. Now he has a gold chain. There's something about the elevation of Joseph that invites us to compare and contrast with the falling of Judah.

Later he receives those things back. But there's something about Joseph's situation here that does invite that comparison. He's given a new name and a new wife. And this suggests in part that Pharaoh is playing the part of a new father figure to Joseph.

Joseph has left his family behind. Maybe he thinks his father Jacob was involved in the plot to sell him into slavery. His father was angry with him when he told his second dream.

He sent him on a dangerous mission to seek out his brothers, knowing that his brothers hated him. Maybe it was his father's intention to cast him out of the family. He doesn't necessarily know at this point.

[14 : 33] But now, as Pharaoh receives him, he seems to have this new father figure. He functions as the firstborn. The only thing that Pharaoh is greater in regard to is the throne itself.

This, again, connects with the events of the previous two chapters, where Joseph has enjoyed such high status, first of all in Potiphar's house and then also in the prison, that he is second in command and nothing under his charge is of any concern to his master, because his master, in both situations, trusts him implicitly.

The land is plentiful for seven years. But Joseph, too. He forgets the hardship of his father's house and he's fruitful and he names his two sons after this.

Joseph is about 30 years old at this time and he's coming to a new level of authority. 30 years is the age where priests would enter into their office. But it's also perhaps significant that he's about to embark on the 14th year of his life in Egypt.

He was sold into slavery at the age of 17 when he was first pastoring the flock with his brothers. And now he's about to enter the 14th year. The transition from the 13th to the 14th year is an auspicious time within the story of Abraham and in the story of Jacob.

[15 : 52] In the story of Abraham, it's the 13th year after the birth of Ishmael that the birth of Isaac is promised. And then it's the entrance into that 14th year is the birth of Isaac.

In the story of Jacob, he serves for 14 years and it's in that 14th year that Joseph is born and in which he seeks for release and to go his own way.

Joseph's birth there is associated with the 14th year and with release in chapter 30. Now let's think about the story of Joseph more generally.

And maybe there's something to be learned from the dreams of Pharaoh that relate not just to the land of Egypt but also to Joseph himself. It describes seven beautiful cows followed by seven ugly cows grazing in the meadow or swamp or among the reeds.

And when we actually look at that more closely, there seem to be plays upon words. Joseph has been talked about earlier as pasturing the sheep with his brothers.

[16 : 58] And the way that grazing in the reeds is described, it plays upon the language of grazing the sheep with his brothers.

Joseph's situation is very, very similar to the seven beautiful cows. Joseph grazing the sheep with his brothers, seven beautiful cows grazing in the reed grass.

A word that seems similar to that for with their brothers. Now, is there anything more that we can make of this? Is this just an interesting literary comparison?

Maybe there is more to it. Joseph is swallowed up by his brothers. Jacob serves seven years for Rachel, who's described as beautiful, just like the cows.

And seven years for the ugly cows, for Leah, whose eyes are described as *rakot*. A word that has the same sound as words used to describe the ugly cows.

[18 : 03] Is there some connection? There are seven beautiful years in the story of Jacob's life and serving for Rachel. And those seem to be swallowed up by seven ugly years.

All the beauty of Rachel and her children seems to have come to nothing. Rachel has died. The firstborn of Rachel, Joseph, has been taken down into Egypt. It seems that his life has been wasted.

And what is left? The ugly cows. The children of Leah and their handmaids. That do not seem to have produced anything of beauty. Rather, their situation is just as ugly as before.

They have eaten up Rachel and her children. But there's nothing really to show for it. Those seven years that Jacob served for Rachel, those beautiful years, those first seven years, seem now to be worthless.

All the fruit that they seem to have borne has been swallowed up by the ugly years, by the ugly cows, by the children of Leah and the handmaids. But is there another way of reading the story?

[19 : 04] Is there another way of understanding how these years, how these children, can relate together? Maybe Joseph, at this point, suddenly sees something different about his life.

Have the seven years been completely swallowed years? Or is there an alternative? Could the seven beautiful years provide for the seven ugly years, so that all make it through together?

And maybe there's something more in Joseph's own dream that he can see at this point. If you think about Joseph's own dreams, there are dreams related to sheaves in the field, which is interesting because they don't seem to be farmers.

They seem to be shepherds, which suggests that there's something odd about this particular picture. The second dream also involves the sun, moon and eleven stars bowing down.

Now, what might that mean? Think about it. There are the sun, the moon and the eleven stars, that's thirteen altogether, bowing down to him.

[20 : 03] He's the fourteenth. In the story of his birth in chapter 30, his birth represented the end of the fourteenth year. The time of deliverance.

His birth was that event that, for Jacob, was seen as the sign that he should move forward, that God had blessed him, that suddenly his bride, Rachel, had born a child.

And this was a sign that God had blessed him. In the same way here, maybe Joseph is the fourteenth. Maybe this is about time, not just about his supremacy over his brothers.

Perhaps all of these fourteens mean something. Perhaps the fourteen of the seven years plus seven in serving for Rachel and Leah. Perhaps the fourteen years that he's just entering into the completion of in the events of his sail into Egypt and his service within Egypt.

Perhaps the fourteen that is associated with the sun, moon and eleven stars. Perhaps the fourteen that's associated with the seven years of plenty and the seven years of famine. Perhaps they're all connected to his life as well.

[21 : 11] Perhaps he's part of the key to the puzzle. And perhaps the dream of Pharaoh is a key to the puzzle of his life. Bringing his life to the dream of Pharaoh and bringing the dream of Pharaoh to his life enables both of the things to come to light.

It helps him to understand what his life has meant. God's hand in his troubles to that point. But also it helps him to understand the plight of Egypt and how to address it.

Once again this interpretation is far from certain. But it seems to have something to it. There are details here that are worth attending to. And as we look more closely into them perhaps we'll notice something that we have not seen before.

A question to consider. How does thinking back to chapter 12 and the promise given to Abraham and his call help us to understand some of what God is bringing to pass here?