

Genesis 39: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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- [0 : 00] Genesis chapter 39 Now Joseph had been brought down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, had bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there.
- The Lord was with Joseph, and he became a successful man, and he was in the house of his Egyptian master. His master saw that the Lord was with him, and that the Lord caused all that he did to succeed in his hands.
- So Joseph found favour in his sight, and attended him, and he made him overseer of his house, and put him in charge of all that he had. From the time that he made him overseer in his house, and over all that he had, the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake.
- The blessing of the Lord was on all that he had, in house and field. So he left all that he had in Joseph's charge, and because of him he had no concern about anything but the food he ate.
- Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance, and after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph, and said, Lie with me. But he refused, and said to his master's wife, Behold, because of me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my charge.
- [1 : 16] He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?
- And as she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her, to lie beside her or to be with her. But one day, when he went into the house to do his work, and none of the men of the house were there in the house, she caught him by his garment, saying, Lie with me.
- But he left his garment in her hand, and fled and got out of the house. And as soon as she saw that he had left his garment in her hand, and had fled out of the house, she called to the men of her household, and said to them, See, he has brought among us a Hebrew to laugh at us.
- He came in to me to lie with me. And I cried out with a loud voice. And as soon as he heard that I lifted up my voice and cried out, he left his garment beside me, and fled and got out of the house.
- Then she laid up his garment by her, until his master came home. And she told him the same story, saying, The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us, came in to me to laugh at me.
- [2 : 23] But as soon as I lifted up my voice and cried, he left his garment beside me, and fled out of the house. As soon as his master heard the words that his wife spoke to him, This is the way your servant treated me, his anger was kindled.
- And Joseph's master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined. And he was there in prison. But the Lord was with Joseph, and showed him steadfast love, and gave him favour in the sight of the keeper of the prison.

And the keeper of the prison put Joseph in charge of all the prisoners who were in the prison. Whatever was done there, he was the one who did it. The keeper of the prison paid no attention to anything that was in Joseph's charge, because the Lord was with him.

And whatever he did, the Lord made it succeed. In Genesis 39, it is once again extremely important that we read it alongside the passages that surround it.

Chapters 37, 38 and 39 belong very much together. In chapter 37, a garment is stripped from Joseph. He is cast into a pit, and the garment is later presented as evidence.

[3 : 32] In the chapters that follow, there is a story of goats and disguise. And we see the same thing in the story of Joseph in chapter 37. This is the third iteration of some of these themes.

And it highlights the entangled themes of Judah and Joseph, and the ways that their stories and their characters are bound up together, and playing off against each other as a sort of diptych. Joseph, once again, is the favoured son in this situation.

He's the favoured servant. He has things entrusted into his hands. Judah is tempted to lie with a woman in chapter 38, and he gives in to that temptation. But when Joseph is tempted by Potiphar's wife, he resists.

In both cases, personal items are taken and later produced in evidence. In the case of Judah, it's the cord, the staff, and the signet. And in the case of Joseph, it's his garment.

The story of chapter 39 is bookended by two statements, in verses 1 to 6, and then in verses 20 to 23. In both of these sections, we see the same sorts of patterns played out.

[4 : 36] Joseph is taken down to Egypt. Joseph is placed in the jail. God is with him. God is with him in the house. God is with him in the jail. He finds favour in the sight of Potiphar.

He finds favour in the sight of the keeper of the prison. All things are entrusted to his oversight in both situations. Potiphar does not concern himself with the property that he has entrusted in Joseph's hand, and the keeper of the prison pays no attention to anything in Joseph's charge.

God causes everything that Joseph does to prosper at the beginning and at the end. And so even in the most dramatic change in Joseph's condition, there is still great continuity.

And continuity also with what we see in chapter 37. This recalls in some ways the story of Jacob in Laban's house, where even as his external condition deteriorates, and he's brought into a greater state of servitude, he still rises and is blessed and is made to prosper.

God blesses Jacob even in servitude, and the same is true with Joseph his son. There are two temptation scenes with Potiphar's wife. In the first she comes and lifts up her eyes on Joseph and says, lie with me.

[5 : 42] He refuses and he gives three reasons. First of all his master's trust and his trustworthiness in response. Second, the fact that she is the one thing that has been held back from him. And then third, the fact that he cannot do this thing and sin against God.

Now this is a forbidden fruit story. Potiphar is like God in this situation and Joseph is like Adam. Joseph sees himself as responsible to a higher master though. And the theme of loyalty in Joseph's story is an important one.

The question of to whom is he loyal? Is he going to be faithful or is he going to be someone who's in it for himself? He is the one who exemplifies wisdom in the garden.

He resists temptation and he exercises shrewdness and wisdom and things prosper in his hands under the rule of a father figure. Just as in the Garden of Eden there's just one thing that's forbidden to him and he refuses to take the forbidden fruit of Potiphar's wife.

On the other hand, Potiphar's wife acts as an Eve type character. She sees that Joseph is good and she wants to take him. Now this might remind us of some other stories as well. We might think of the story of Sarai in the land of Egypt and Pharaoh sees that she is beautiful just as Potiphar's wife sees the handsomeness or the beauty of Joseph and wants to take him.

[6 : 59] However, even if Joseph is faithful in resisting this temptation, he will end up being cast out of this garden type place and having the garment removed from him. This temptation is repeated day after day.

She keeps tempting him in this way. And the second key temptation scene, she catches his garment and says, lie with me. And he's in a very compromised situation here. She has evidence in her hand and yet there's no witness to bear up his side of the story.

And so if he's faithful, he will end up being accused of unfaithfulness anyway. If he wants to be seen as faithful, perhaps the best thing for him to do is to lie with her. She will keep the story secret and he'll appear to be a really good servant for his master.

His master will praise him as his mistress praises him. And yet he will have been fundamentally unfaithful. He would have taken the forbidden fruit, the one thing that was forbidden to him. I've mentioned the story of Sarai and Pharaoh, but there's another story that's more important as a background here.

Abram, Sarai and Hagar. In the story of chapter 16, a Hebrew mistreats an Egyptian servant. And in that case, there's a sort of sexual end in the situation too.

[8 : 12] They want to use Hagar to raise up seed for Sarai. And here the Egyptian mistress wants to use the servant Joseph, the Hebrew servant, for her own sexual pleasure.

The accusation that she later makes against Joseph is a significant one. She makes it twice. She claims that her husband has brought in this Hebrew to laugh at us.

Now that's the same expression that is used of Ishmael in chapter 21 verse 9. It's the reason why Sarah wanted to cast out the bondwoman and her son, Hagar and Ishmael.

Once again, Sarai blamed her husband in chapters 21 and 16. And here, Potiphar's wife blames her husband. There are more fall themes playing out.

We saw that in chapter 16. It's a fall event that's taking place. The woman takes this forbidden fruit, as it were, gives it to her husband. And in that situation, the husband listens to the voice of his wife, calling back to the language used in the fall.

[9 : 16] Now Joseph is here suffering an Ishmael-like experience. He's already been brought down into Egypt by the Ishmaelites. In chapter 37, there were a series of events that played according to the pattern of chapter 21, as Hagar and Ishmael are sent out into the wilderness.

And those patterns suggest that Joseph is an Ishmaelite character. He's a character who's connected with Hagar and Ishmael. Now Hagar was the servant, the Egyptian servant, afflicted as a stranger in the house of the Hebrews.

Now we see a Hebrew servant afflicted in the house of the Egyptians. And once again, there are themes that connect the story. Potiphar's wife, in certain respects, is behaving like Sarai, wanting to cast out the bondwoman and her son as the one who's brought in to laugh.

Again, the connection with Isaac's name there. What is the point of all of this? Well, it seems to me that Hagar's story did not end in chapter 21.

It's playing beneath the surface of the story still. Abram and Sarai used Hagar as a means of raising up seed for themselves. But Hagar was never merely a means to an end.

[10 : 32] Hagar is a person in her own right, seen by God. God visits her in the wilderness and delivers her. And God cares for Hagar. And Hagar's not just going to be cast out of the story.

Abram and Sarai may think that she's out of the story. And there may be a number of generations that have passed since she last appeared. But now the story is playing out again. And it's playing out again because it will not be until Israel has seen itself and entered into the experience of Hagar and Ishmael and restored this lost son, this son who, like Ishmael, has been cast out of the family.

Until they restore that son, enter into that son's experience, place themselves in the shoes of Hagar and are redeemed from that situation and enter into Hagar's experience where she experienced a sort of exodus-like event, afflicted by Sarai, like Israel was afflicted by Pharaoh, and then brought out of that land in which they were a stranger.

They have to enter into the experience of the Egyptian. Only when they've begun to see the world through Hagar and Ishmael's eyes will they be prepared to be part of that great deliverance and redemption that God has planned to work through them.

As we're listening to these stories then, it's important to recognise the partial playing-outs of musical themes, as it were, like listening to a piece of music where you hear snatches of a theme that calls your mind back to a previous set of events in an opera or something like that, bringing to mind the charged emotions and realities of a past series of events and shows you that they are at play in the present.

[12 : 11] That's what we see in the case of the story of Hagar and also in the case of the story of the Garden of Eden. Potiphar's wife gathers the men of her house first. Why is she doing this?

Now, I think it's because they are probably jealous brothers of Joseph in this situation. Like the jealous brothers in chapter 37, they've seen Joseph advanced ahead of them, favoured over them, and as jealous brothers, they will want to support anyone who's going to bring Joseph down.

It also gives her leverage against her husband. Why is Potiphar angry when she speaks to him? At whom is he angry? Seems to me it's quite likely that he's angry at her. He knows that there's something more going on in this situation, that Joseph is a faithful servant and that his wife is not faithful.

He puts Joseph in with the king's prisoners, the prison that was under the control of the captain of the guard. Now, who is the captain of the guard? He is the captain of the guard. Why isn't he putting Joseph in with just common prisoners?

Why is he putting him in a prison where he's with prisoners that would receive more favourable treatment, more significant figures? What's more, he allows Joseph to arise to prominence within this context and gives him great authority, much as he enjoyed earlier on in the story of chapter 39.

[13 : 28] It seems to me that he knows that his wife is not telling the truth and that Joseph is actually faithful. A question to consider. There are lots of twos in the Joseph and the Judah stories.

There are two dreams of Joseph. There are two sons that die. There are two that are born through Tamar. There are two temptations by part of his wife. There are two dreams in the prisons. Two dreams of Pharaoh.

Two sets of seven years. Two sons of Joseph. Two visits of the brothers. Two times the Egyptians beg for food, etc. One of the twos we see are two stories of Joseph being stripped of a garment and thrown into a pit.

And in both cases, there is a garment presented as evidence against him. The story of Joseph being stripped of his garment and thrown into the pit in chapter 37 is one in which he had very little agency.

[14:31] There's something that moves forward in the story. What are some of the ways in which these two incidents differ even in their similarities? And what can we learn from those differences and developments?

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