

Study: The Joseph Story

Text: Genesis 39: Joseph in Egypt (39:1–23)¹

With this chapter, our attention is drawn back to the “Joseph story” and his whereabouts in Egypt. In Chapter 38, did matters in Canaan with Jacob’s family improve or worsen? In Chapter 39, will matters in Egypt with Joseph improve or worsen? Let’s study and see!

I. Joseph Prospers in Potiphar’s House (39:1–6a)

A. The Lord Prospers Joseph (39:1–2)

1. The narrative in 39:1 resumes the story where it left off at the end of Gen 37:36. One of the techniques in Hebrew narrative for resumption of an interrupted story is to repeat much of the verse that came prior to the break. Compare 37:36 with 39:1 and take note of the repetition. Then answer these questions:

- a. What is the name of the man who acquired Joseph from the caravan of Ishmaelites?
- b. What is his nationality?
- c. What is his occupation?

2. One of the major themes in the Joseph story is the “ascent” of Joseph to Pharaoh’s court in Egypt. However, there are three significant “descents” that precede Joseph’s ascent. Several of these use the language of physical descent to skillfully mirror the social descent (or humbling) that later gives way to his ascent (or exaltation). Where are these 3 symbolic “descents”? Look up the following passages.

Gen 37:24–25

Gen 37:36; 39:1

Gen 39:20

¹ The outline of the passage we are following basically follows the outline provided in K. A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, vol. 1B, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2005), 82.

3. In 39:2 we are told three things about Joseph. What do you think is the logical relationship between the first and the second statements?

4. The third statement about Joseph in v. 2 speaks to Joseph's location and situates the rest of this scene (vv. 1-19) in what significant place?

B. Potiphar Puts Joseph in Charge (39:3-6a)

1. Between vv. 2-5 we find five overt explanations for Joseph's success within Potiphar's house. List them below:

a. 39:2

b. 39:3

c. 39:3

d. 39:5

e. 39:5

2. What did Potiphar's recognition of God's blessing on account of Joseph lead him to do?

3. Between vv. 4-6 an expression is used repeatedly to describe just how much of Potiphar's estate was given into Joseph care and control. Re-read those verses; what is the expression, and where is it found? Why do you think Moses made a point to say this over and over?

4. At the end of 39:5, a paired expression is also used to describe the realms over which Joseph exercised stewardship and received Yahweh's blessings; which two realms are mentioned here?

5. Joseph's ascent under Potiphar seems to foreshadow Joseph's later ascent under Pharaoh. How are the two "realms" that are mentioned in 39:5 relevant to Joseph's responsibilities under Pharaoh? (See the follow passages in Genesis for some reminders of the story to come.)

41:40-41

41:47-49 (esp. 48)

45:8

47:14

47:20

6. Interesting note: Aside from Jacob's end-of-life blessing (Gen 49:18) and the divine judgment on Judah's sons (Gen 38:7, 10), the only occurrences of the divine name *Yahweh* (spelled LORD) in the Joseph story occur in *this chapter* (Gen 39:2, 3, 5, 21, 23). Ken Mathews puts it well (p. 726):

What the dreams (chaps. 37; 40-41) and their subsequent fulfillings imply (chaps. 42-45), Joseph's successes in Potiphar's household make plain. That is, the Lord God of Israel's fathers was enabling Joseph's ascent. The Lord ensured that Joseph's trials would redound to the good of others: "The LORD blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph" (v. 5).

7. According to 39:6, what was the only thing Potiphar concerned himself with? Why?

Interpretation sidebar: Gen 39:6 mentions the "food (literally 'bread') he ate." To what does this refer? Two main interpretive options exist:

a. It could refer merely to Potiphar's diet (many commentators take it that way) and so could be an indication that this Egyptian officer was not willing to allow the Hebrew to oversee his meals. How might this interpretation be supported by Gen 43:32?

b. Others have suggested that “the food/bread he ate” is a euphemism for Potiphar’s sexual relationship with his wife. Why might some think this?

(1) In v. 6 the expression “he had no concern” (about anything except that bread he ate) is the Hebrew verb *yada'*; which is sometimes translated as ‘to know’ (in the sexual sense). See Gen 4:1, 17, 25 for a few examples. So perhaps this is a double-entendre: he *knew* nothing but the bread he ate (sex with Mrs. Potiphar), since Joseph was over everything else.

(2) Compare Gen 39:6 and 39:9, where each passage speaks to the *one thing* pertaining to Potiphar that Joseph does not have the privilege of controlling. How might v. 9 lead one to interpret v. 6, given the apparent parallel?

(3) Finally, read Prov 30:20. What kind of activity does a prostitute engage in? How is it metaphorically described in this verse? How might this affect one’s interpretation of Gen 39:6?

c. A final mediating option is to say that the literal food of Potiphar is primarily in view, but that Moses is intentionally using loaded language with double-meaning in order to foreshadow the episode in vv. 7-19.

II. Potiphar’s Wife Seduces Joseph (39:6b–19)

A. Joseph Rejects Potiphar’s Wife (39:6b–9)

1. In 39:6 we are given a physical description of Joseph.

a. How does the text describe Joseph here?

b. Look up Gen 29:17. Who else is described with this kind of language? What is this character’s relationship to Joseph?

c. In Hebrew narrative, we are rarely given any physical characteristics of a character; when we are, those characteristics are significant to the story line. Why might these qualities of Joseph be singled out for description here?

d. Finally, in connection with the prior question, what is Joseph asked to do in v. 7?

2. In 39:7-8, Potiphar's wife is referred to twice using the same expression.

- What is that phrase?
- What does it say about Potiphar's relationship to Joseph? What obligations would this entail?
- What does it say about Potiphar's relationship to the woman? What obligations would this entail?

3. What is the narrator's summary description of Joseph's response?

- Not only does Moses summarize his response, but he also provides Joseph's language toward her. In terms of his obligations to Potiphar, why does Joseph refuse (vv. 8-9a)?
- In terms of his obligations to God, why does Joseph refuse (v. 9b)?
- By describing the sin as a sin *against God*, do you think Joseph is saying that this would not be a sin against Potiphar?

(1) Read Psalm 51 (the superscription and v. 4). How is David's language similar?

(2) What truth are Joseph and David getting at here? How will this help you fight temptation?

d. Finally, consider the episode between Judah and Tamar. It seems to stand as a foil for the episode between Joseph and Potiphar's wife. How are these similar? How are they different?

B. Joseph Flees Potiphar's Wife (39:10–12)

1. How frequently does the woman proposition Joseph, according to v. 10?
2. What three actions constitute Joseph's response to these solicitations (v. 10)?
3. What circumstance in the house leads to her final proposition in this segment of text (v. 11)?
4. How does Joseph respond this time (v. 12)? What can you learn from Joseph's actions here in your own battle with temptation?
5. Observation: There is a linguistic parallel between Potiphar's action in 39:6 and Joseph's action in 39:12 (the same Hebrew words are used in both).
 - v. 6: So *he left* all that he had in Joseph's charge (lit. '*in the hand of* Joseph')
 - v. 12: But *he left* his garment in her hand (lit. '*in the hand of* her')

In both verses, the action is the right thing to do. How does it go for Potiphar when he leaves things in Joseph's hand? How does it go for Joseph when he leaves things in her hand?

C. Potiphar's Wife Deceives the Household (39:13–19)

1. A line written by British playwright and poet William Congreve has been adapted into popular culture this way: “Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.” Surely this is true here!

- a. How long does it take for Potiphar’s wife to begin the false accusations (vv. 13-14)? Whom does she address first with Joseph’s “wrongdoing”?
- b. Who does she seem to blame for Joseph’s misbehavior in the first part of her speech in v. 14?
- c. What is false about her retelling of the events and intentions as they pertain to Joseph (vv. 14b-15)?
- d. Whom does she address next about Joseph? What title for this man is used in v. 16 (pay attention to the pronoun)?
- e. What is Potiphar’s response to the story told by his wife (v. 19)?

2. Twice in the passage (vv. 14, 17) we are told Joseph’s coming is “to laugh at us/me.” This may not be the best way to translate the Hebrew verb (*le-tsacheq*). While some forms of this verb can have the sense ‘to laugh’ (Gen 17:17; 18:12, 15; 21:6), this is a different form that appears here to have sexual overtones in some contexts. Look up Gen 26:8 (‘laughing with’ is the same Hebrew verb that we have here in Gen 39). Whatever activity this verb refers to, it leads Abimelech to conclude that Isaac and Rebekah are married. So probably ‘laughing’ is not all that was going on here.

3. Finally, how does this story fit in with the deception theme that we’ve seen in the Joseph narrative? How, for example, is this similar to the deception in Genesis 37?

III. Joseph Prospers in Pharaoh’s Prison (39:20-23)

A. Potiphar Puts Joseph in Prison (39:20)

1. Here we find another “descent” of Joseph before his ascent to Pharaoh’s court.

- a. How is this step down worse than the others?
- b. At the same time, what detail about the nature of this prison puts Joseph closer to Pharaoh's court?

2. God had given Joseph (through the two dreams of Genesis 37) indications of greatness. If you were in his shoes at this point, what would you be thinking about the viability of these dreams coming to fruition? What might you be thinking of God's involvement in your life if you were Joseph?

B. Jailer Puts Joseph in Charge (39:21–23)

1. What do we actually learn (explicitly) of God's involvement in Joseph's life at this low point?

39:21 (one thing)

39:23 (two things)

2. How is the prison-keeper's treatment of Joseph similar to Potiphar's? What did he recognize about Joseph?

C. Discussion questions:

1. What do you learn about humanity from this passage?
2. What do you learn about God from this passage?