

Study: The Joseph Story

Text: Genesis 40: Joseph, Savior of Egypt, Part I: Dreams of Pharaoh's Officials (40:1–23)¹

By the end of Genesis 39 it seems like Joseph has experienced two steps backward and finally one step forward. With that step forward his “fortunes” seem to be changing. Let’s see if things are any better by the end of Genesis 40.

I. Cupbearer and Baker Imprisoned (40:1–4a)

A. Two characters are introduced at the beginning of Genesis 40.

1. Whom do they serve?

2. In what capacity do they serve?

3. Who happens to be in the same prison-house, according to 40:3? What detail from 39:30 allows for the slave Joseph’s destiny to intersect with those of two important men of the king?

4. Compare Gen 40:2–3 with the prior story at 39:19–20. How are these two men similar to Joseph?

5. Compare Gen 40:1 with the prior story at 39:8–10, 13 (see also 40:15). How are these two men unlike Joseph?

B. Acc. to 40:4, what was Joseph appointed to do? For how long?

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.

II. Dreams in Prison (40:4b–8)

A. What happened to each of the men, according to 40:5? When did this happen?

1. The text seems to make a big point about each man's experience. What two things are mentioned in v. 5b about each man?

2. Anticipating what happens a little later in the chapter, why are these details important to mention now?

B. The next day Joseph sees the two men and begins to ask questions.

1. What does Joseph notice about them in 40:6–7?

2. What is it that bothers the men most (40:8)? If they were not in prison, who might they have thought they could go to for the interpretation of their dreams?²

3. Joseph responds by asking a rhetorical question that assumes the answer *yes*. What does he ask?

² In the ancient near eastern world, being attached to the royal court, they have probably seen the king's counselors consider the dreams of others and give interpretations. They, however, are cut off from this possibility due to their imprisonment.

4. What does Joseph tell them to do? Why do you think Joseph would ask them to do this?³

C. Once again, there are some striking similarities between these men and Joseph.

1. What has Joseph experienced in Genesis 37 that is mirrored in this passage?

2. How many dreams are there in Genesis 37? In Genesis 40?

3. How are the men's feelings toward their dreams like or unlike Joseph's own experiences?

III. Cupbearer's Dream and Its Interpretation (40:9–15)

A. Who is the first man to tell his dream to Joseph?

1. What object does he explain that he sees first (40:9b)? What three things are on it?

2. What fast-moving changes occur to these items (40:10)?

3. Whose cup does he see? In whose hand is it located when he sees it? What does he do with it? Where does he place the cup? (40:11)

³ Ken Mathews aptly comments: "In ancient thinking, dreams were the prime vehicle of divine revelations. Joseph acknowledges this but departs from the common viewpoint that professional magicians were required to interpret the officials' dreams: 'Do not interpretations belong to God?' (v. 8). God, who gave the revelation, could provide the interpretation to whomever he chose. Dreams were not the privilege of humans but the domain of God. That Joseph requested to hear the dreams . . . implied that he could interpret them, if God so chose to reveal their meaning to him. The recurring observation 'The LORD was with Joseph,' (39:2, 23) by the narrator in the previous chapter has conditioned the reader to assume that Joseph, too, knew that God was favoring him in everything he attempted. Why not also in the matter of their dreams?" (p. 747).

B. Joseph's interpretation (40:12-13)

1. What do the three branches represent?
2. What will Pharaoh do at the end of the determined time interval?
3. The expression used to describe Pharaoh's actions toward the cupbearer involve "lifting up his head." This expression (and another similar one, to "lift up the face") is used metaphorically/idiomatically in the OT. Consider the following passages and determine whether the expression normally bears a positive or a negative connotation:
2 Kgs 25:27 (note that ESV's "graciously freed" = "lifted up the head of")
Job 10:15
Ps 3:3

C. Joseph's request (40:14-15)

1. Joseph is insistent that the cupbearer do four things for him. What are the four verbs used in his requests (40:14)?
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.

d.

2. Re: the first item, does the cupbearer follow through? See 40:23.

3. Re: the second item, the Hebrew expression “do me the kindness” is literally “do/perform with me *hesed* (covenant mercy/steadfast love).” We have seen this Hebrew word *hesed* in the Joseph story in one other place: Gen 39:21. Review that verse and indicate who it is there that shows *hesed* to Joseph.

4. In 40:15 Joseph grounds his requests in the reality that he has been treated wrongfully. What important word is used to indicate that he is giving grounds for his request?

a. What event in another place and time is first provided as evidence of Joseph’s wrongful treatment (15a)?

b. What event in the present place and time is evidence of Joseph’s wrongful treatment (15b)?

c. Even though the language of v. 15b applies to Joseph’s imprisonment in Genesis 40, in what other context are these words equally true?

IV. Baker’s Dream and Its Interpretation (40:16–19)

A. Who now conveys his dream to Joseph? Why? (40:16)

1. What item in the dream is first described?
2. What is in the top-most layer (40:17)? What is happening to the food there?

B. Joseph's interpretation (40:18-19)

1. What do the three baskets represent?
2. What will Pharaoh do at the end of the determined time interval?
3. What do the birds of the dream represent?
4. Recall that we have pointed out that to "lift up the face/head" is an idiom in the OT, a metaphorical expression for showing kindness or raising to a position of favor. (Idioms are not to be taken literally—consider what kind of absurdities would ensue if you tried to take literally the English expressions *He's straddling the fence on the issue* or *Johnny kicked the bucket last weekend*.) In Gen 40:19, how is this expression being used with the butler?

V. Fulfillment of the Dreams (40:20-23)

A. What time interval is given for the next series of events beginning in 40:20?

1. What is special about the day?
2. What does Pharaoh do for all his servants on this day?
3. What verbal actions toward the cupbearer and the butler (in v.20) does Pharaoh engage in?

4. Is the same language used of both? Are the actions the same (40:21-22)?

B. The last half of 40:22 specifies that Pharaoh's actions were in accordance with what? What would this indicate about God's activity behind the scenes? How does this verse relate to 40:8?

C. Joseph's wild success in properly interpreting the dreams would lead one to expect that the cupbearer would immediately follow through on Joseph's requests.

1. What in fact happens with the cupbearer (40:23)?

2. So was this a wasted opportunity? Taking a peek at 41:1, how much longer would Joseph have to wait? What do you think was going through Joseph's mind?

D. Discussion questions:

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

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