

Study: The Joseph Story

Text: Genesis 41: Joseph, Savior of Egypt, Part II: Dreams of Pharaoh (41:1–57)¹

I. Pharaoh Dreams Twice (41:1–7)

A. How long after the events of Genesis 40 do these events occur in Genesis 41?

1. Who becomes the center of attention in these first seven verses?
2. What sort of experience does he have? How does this kind of experience relate to the earlier parts of the Joseph story?

B. Dream #1 (41:1–4)

1. In what geographical setting does the first dream take place?

2. What comes out of the Nile?

- a. How many of them come?
- b. How are they described?
- c. What are they doing?

3. What comes out of the Nile afterwards?

- a. How many of them come?
- b. How are they described?
- c. What do they do to the others?

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.

4. The fact that Pharaoh dreams is not the only point of correspondence with Joseph. Look again at the description of the first seven cows in 41:2. What does it say of them by way of the first description? Now look back at 39:6. How is Joseph's physical appearance described?² The alert reader would naturally associate this language (and the double-dreams) with Joseph and expect that he might be drawn into these events.

5. Interpretive comment from Mathews (755):

The Nile water system was the most conspicuous feature of Egypt's geography and the primary source of the country's economic and social stability. The Nile was deified in Egyptian religion . . . and the appearance of the cows from the river may have suggested to Pharaoh a close connection to the gods. Pharaoh's state was responsible for maintaining the irrigation of the river system, distributing land grants, gathering taxes, and storing grain. Despite the success of natural irrigation and human engineering (dams, canals), high and low Niles occurred, producing famine and its ill effects on society.

C. Dream #2 (41:5-7)

1. Unlike the prior dream, there is no geographical setting specified. And yet, the nature of the items described here (the "reed/stalk") are a well-known feature of Egyptian life and agriculture. Look up these passages to see how the image of the reed/stalk is used to evoke the Egyptians:

2 Kgs 18:21

Ezek 29:6-7

2. What sort of items does Pharaoh see in the second dream?

a. How many of them appear first, and how are they described?

b. How many of them appear second, and how are they described?

² The second expression used of Joseph ("handsome of appearance") is exactly the same Hebrew expression used of the first seven cows, rendered "attractive" in 41:2, 4.

c. What do the second set do to the first?

II. Cupbearer Remembers Joseph (41:8–13)

A. What is Pharaoh's disposition towards the dreams in the morning (41:8)?

1. Why do you think he feels this way? Is there anything normal about the kinds of activities the second sets of cows and ears engage in?

2. Whom does Pharaoh call in for help? What are they able to do for him?

3. The final expression in v. 8 is used (almost exactly the same) elsewhere in the Joseph narrative. Where? Who says this?³

B. In 41:9, which verb is used to describe the cupbearer's action toward his offenses?

1. Review 40:14. What two mental activities did Joseph ask the cupbearer to do when it went well with him? (Interestingly, the verb in 41:9 is the same form of the verb used in “mentioning” to Pharaoh.)

2. Look at what it is in 41:9 that the cupbearer remembers. Is it singular or plural? What do you think he is referring to?⁴

³ See Gen 40:8.

⁴ It has been suggested by some commentators that the plural form indicates that he considers his forgetting Joseph an offense/sin, while at the same time his bringing up Joseph now means that he has to bring up his

C. In vv. 10–13, the cupbearer summarizes to Pharaoh what we studied in Genesis 40. Yet, there are a few important comments that he makes to Pharaoh.

1. How does the cupbearer refer to Joseph initially—by name or by something else (41:12)?
2. This same sort of expression is used of Joseph in 39:14, 17. Is Joseph’s outsider status (as a “Hebrew”) in that context going to lead to Joseph’s benefit or detriment? What about here in Gen 41:12?
3. In v. 13 the cupbearer mentions one final thing about Joseph that is even more important than the fact that he provided interpretations for the two dreams. What? Why is this important to say to Pharaoh?

III. Pharaoh Describes His Dreams (41:14–24)

A. The interview (41:14–16)

1. Once Pharaoh understands that Joseph can interpret the dream for him, he summons him to royal court. Contrast the amount of time that elapsed during Joseph’s “descent” (from pit in Genesis 37 to pit in Gen 41:14) with the amount of time that elapsed for his “ascent” into Pharaoh’s court. What critical time-word is used in 41:14 to signal the abrupt reversal of fortunes?⁵

prior offense/sin against Pharaoh. One other interesting tidbit about the word translated here ‘offense’. It shares the same root as the verb (*hata*’), which can also be translated as ‘to sin’. Joseph is thrown in prison precisely because he refuses to ‘sin’ (Gen 39:9), while the cupbearer and baker are thrown in prison because they did ‘sin’ (40:1).

⁵ The Hebrew expression behind the English “they quickly brought him” could be translated “they ran him.”

2. What visible preparations signal the change in status from Joseph the slave/prisoner to Joseph the wise counselor?

3. In 41:16 Joseph's response to Pharaoh's report of his ability to interpret dreams is not presumptuous. Whom does he credit with providing the answer that Pharaoh is seeking? How is this similar to Gen 40:8?

B. From vv. 17-24 we hear Pharaoh summarizing the content of his dreams in accordance with the description we read in vv. 1-7.

1. Once again, what does Pharaoh say he did to resolve the problem (41:24)?

2. What was the outcome? How does this statement pave the way for Joseph?

IV. Joseph Interprets the Dreams (41:25-36)

A. With respect to the dreams, the use of numbers is intriguing.

1. How many dreams did Pharaoh have?

2. What number does Joseph use to describe these dreams, acc. to 41:25 and 26? What does Joseph mean by saying this?

3. What do the numbers *seven* represent?

4. What do the cows and the ears represent, according to Joseph (41:26-27)?

5. What does the fact that there were *two* dreams by Pharaoh indicate about God, acc. to Joseph (41:32)?

B. Joseph's recommendations: Beginning in v.33, Joseph transitions from dream-interpreter to wise-counselor.

1. What does Joseph recommend that Pharaoh do in light of what God has revealed to him (41:33-35)?

2. What kind of man does Joseph suggest is needed (v. 33)?

3. Acc. to the end of v. 36, what is the *purpose* for keeping a reserve from the years of plenty?

4. As we have seen, acc. to 41:36, Joseph's advice (given because God had revealed these things to Pharaoh) is designed to preserve *the land of Egypt* during the famine. Now read 45:5-8. Who does Joseph later realize that *God* intended to preserve?

Application: How might this affect your view of your own circumstances when you are undergoing trials and difficulties?

V. Pharaoh Makes Joseph Second in Command (41:37-46)

A. Whom does Joseph's proposal please (41:37)?

1. What three things does Pharaoh recognize is true of Joseph (41:38-39)?

2. On this basis, what kind of position does Pharaoh bestow upon Joseph (41:40-41)?

B. What are five visible/tangible signs of Joseph's new authority (41:42-43)? List them below:

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

C. What two things are done to (or for) Joseph to show that he is no longer viewed as the Hebrew outsider (41:45)?

D. Instead of confinement as a slave, what does v. 46 say Joseph could now do? How old was Joseph when he entered service to Pharaoh?

VI. Joseph Fills the Store Cities (41:47–49)

A. How does the text describe the nature of the harvests during the first seven years? (See vv. 47, 49.)

B. The language of “like the sand of the sea” is used elsewhere in Genesis—see Gen 22:17.

1. Who or what is this simile (comparison) describing in Genesis 22?

2. Perhaps by employing in Gen 41 the language God used in promises to the patriarchs, Moses intends the reader to see that God will keep his covenant promises (descendants like the sand of the sea) precisely by using Joseph’s success in Egypt.

VII. Joseph’s Family (41:50–52)

A. During the seven years that the land is fruitful, who/what else is fruitful?

1. What does Joseph call his first son? Why?

2. What does Joseph call his second son? Why?

B. Based on the rationales that Joseph gives for their names, what do you think Joseph thinks God is up to? Does he seem hopeful that God's promises will come to pass? Doubtful? Ambivalent? Why do you think so?

VIII. Joseph Provides Grain (41:53–57)

A. In v. 54 Moses not only indicates that the seven years of famine begins, he mentions that they come about in accordance with what?

B. While there is famine everywhere else, what is present in Egypt (v. 54)? Why?

C. Who does Pharaoh send people to when they cried out to him for bread (v. 55)?

D. Who else comes to Joseph to buy grain? Why (v. 57)?

Final Discussion questions:

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