



Sunday School Lesson
Genesis 41:37-57
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This study continues the exploration of the life of Joseph in the Joseph Story section of Genesis.

I. Context

a. Historical

The larger historical situation remains the same as that in chapter 39. Joseph is now somewhat older and has gone through not only enslavement, but imprisonment which has spanned several years of his life (cf. 40:1; 41:1).

b. Literary

The larger literary context of chapter 41 is the same as in the last study in chapter 39. We won't repeat the details from that initial study (see http://cranfordville.com/Cranfordville/Gen39_1-23SSLess.pdf), but a summary of the highlights may be helpful. The Joseph Story (chaps 37-50) is the third official patriarchal story in the second half of Genesis (chaps 12-50), preceded by the Abraham Story (chaps 12-25) and the Jacob Story (chaps 26-36).

Within the Joseph Story, chapter 41 stands as the climatic episode to the narratives in chapters [39-41](#). This segment traces Joseph's move from his father's house and favored position to his rise to power in the Egyptian pharaoh's house. The move involved slavery and imprisonment but highlights a rather spectacular path for this young Semite. As is noted in the Genesis volume of the Interpretation Commentary (iPreach online), "The entire unit ([39--41](#)) has come a considerable distance. It begins with the mere survival of a boy who dreamed a dangerous dream. It ends with this boy having become a public man with power of life and death (41:44). Those killers of the dream at Shechem had not killed a dream ([37:20](#)). Unknowingly, they had advanced the cause of the dream. Joseph and the narrative have gotten along without the brothers all this time. It is time for their reappearance. But now, their strident way will become humble supplication. By [42:1](#), everything is inverted. Now the brothers hope only to survive. But they must deal with this one for whom the dream has become reality."

Our segment of chapter 41, verses 37-57, stand as the climax of chapter 41. As is noted in the New Interpreter's Bible (Genesis, iPreach online), "The scene changes from Pharaoh's prison to Pharaoh's palace, mirroring Joseph's rise from weakness to strength. The dreams continue; this time Pharaoh himself has two dreams ([vv. 1-7](#)), which enable Joseph's dream to come full circle. After the cupbearer remembers him ([vv. 8-13](#)), Joseph is called forth from prison to interpret the dreams and to give advice based on them ([vv. 14-36](#)). As a result, Pharaoh elevates Joseph to prime minister ([vv. 37-46](#)), in which capacity he proves to be an effective administrator of Egypt's economy ([vv. 47-57](#))."

II. Message

Although various commentaries break down chapter 41 different ways, the suggestion in the *New Interpreter's Bible* seems to me to be a better way of understanding the thought flow in this chapter. Thus we will follow this suggestion.

[Verses 1-36](#) the circumstances of the pharaoh's dream that his advisors couldn't interpret satisfactorily. His cupbearer happened to remember the young Hebrew boy in prison who had correctly interpreted dreams for the cupbearer and the baker earlier. Joseph was then brought to the pharaoh to interpret his dreams ([vv. 17-24](#)). Joseph predicted seven years of severe famine to overtake the land of Egypt after seven prosperous years, as well as advised the pharaoh to appoint someone to supervise extensive preparations during the prosperous years. The reaction of pharaoh to Joseph's interpretation begins our text.

The *Interpreter's Bible* (Genesis, iPreach online) has an excellent summation of this dream against ancient Egyptian culture: "The symbolism of Pharaoh's dream grew out of conceptions deeprooted in Egyptian thought. The Nile, out of which the fertility and the very life of Egypt came, was anciently venerated as the father of the gods. In Egyptian carvings the male ox represented it, and sometimes the ox was accompanied by seven cows. So in that labyrinth of the subconscious out of which dreams arise, some premonition of disaster took shape for Pharaoh in these symbolic pictures of the fat cows and the lean cows — adumbrations of forces that could in fact make the stark difference of good or ill for Egypt, the fertilizing inundations of the river, or no water and paralyzing drought. But though dreams come thus from hidden mental associations which have rational relationship, the conscious mind cannot always recognize the relationship which the symbols express. All that Pharaoh knew was that he was under the shadow of a portent which perplexed and depressed him. The portent was worse when the dream shifted its imagery, but with the same calamitous suggestion. He awoke, and found it was a dream, but the effect of it was so inescapable that he was convinced it was more than a dream. No wonder he sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt, and all the wise men thereof. But they could not interpret what he told them. To the writers of Genesis this was a matter of course. Only an understanding given by God could interpret the realities of today and tomorrow."

a. Rise to Power, vv. 37-46

NASB

37 Now the proposal seemed good to Pharaoh and to all his servants. 38 Then Pharaoh said to his servants, "Can we find a man like this, in whom is a divine spirit?" 39 So Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has informed you of all this, there is no one so discerning and wise as you are. 40 " You shall be over my house, and according to your command all my people shall do homage; only in the throne I will be greater than you." 41 Pharaoh said to Joseph, "See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt." 42 Then Pharaoh took off his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph's hand, and clothed him in garments of fine linen and put the

NRSV

37 The proposal pleased Pharaoh and all his servants. 38 Pharaoh said to his servants, "Can we find anyone else like this — one in whom is the spirit of God?" 39 So Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has shown you all this, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. 40 You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command; only with regard to the throne will I be greater than you." 41 And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt." 42 Removing his signet ring from his hand, Pharaoh put it on Joseph's hand; he arrayed him in garments of fine

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37 Joseph's suggestions were well received by Pharaoh and his advisers. 38 As they discussed who should be appointed for the job, Pharaoh said, "Who could do it better than Joseph? For he is a man who is obviously filled with the spirit of God." 39 Turning to Joseph, Pharaoh said, "Since God has revealed the meaning of the dreams to you, you are the wisest man in the land! 40 I hereby appoint you to direct this project. You will manage my household and organize all my people. Only I will have a rank higher than yours." 41 And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I hereby put you in charge of the entire land of Egypt."

gold necklace around his neck. 43 He had him ride in his second chariot; and they proclaimed before him, "Bow the knee!" And he set him over all the land of Egypt. 44 Moreover, Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Though I am Pharaoh, yet without your permission no one shall raise his hand or foot in all the land of Egypt." 45 Then Pharaoh named Joseph Zaphenath-paneah; and he gave him Asenath, the daughter of Potiphera priest of On, as his wife. And Joseph went forth over the land of Egypt. 46 Now Joseph was thirty years old when he stood before Pharaoh, king of Egypt. And Joseph went out from the presence of Pharaoh and went through all the land of Egypt.

linen, and put a gold chain around his neck. 43 He had him ride in the chariot of his second-in-command; and they cried out in front of him, "Bow the knee!" Thus he set him over all the land of Egypt. 44 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." 45 Pharaoh gave Joseph the name Zaphenath-paneah; and he gave him Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, as his wife. Thus Joseph gained authority over the land of Egypt. 46 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.

42 Then Pharaoh placed his own signet ring on Joseph's finger as a symbol of his authority. He dressed him in beautiful clothing and placed the royal gold chain about his neck. 43 Pharaoh also gave Joseph the chariot of his second-in-command, and wherever he went the command was shouted, "Kneel down!" So Joseph was put in charge of all Egypt. 44 And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I am the king, but no one will move a hand or a foot in the entire land of Egypt without your approval." 45 Pharaoh renamed him Zaphenath-paneah^{F122} and gave him a wife – a young woman named Asenath, the daughter of Potiphera, priest of Heliopolis.^{F123} So Joseph took charge of the entire land of Egypt. 46 He was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. And when Joseph left Pharaoh's presence, he made a tour of inspection throughout the land.

Footnotes:

F122: Zaphenath-paneah probably means "God speaks and lives."

F123: Hebrew of On; also in 41:50.

Comments:

During the past thirteen years Joseph's life took some unbelievable twists and turns. At seventeen he was sold into slavery and taken to Egypt (37:2); now at thirty he was second in command only behind the pharaoh over all Egypt, the prime minister (41:46). This segment highlights the wisdom and insight of the pharaoh in his recognition of the presence and leadership of God in Joseph's life. Joseph had given a good job description for the individual to supervise the preparations for the famine in his interpretation (vv. 25-36); the Egyptian pharaoh was wise enough to recognize that Joseph was the one person who met the qualifications for that job.

Verses 41-44 describe a formal installation ceremony of Joseph. With the pronouncement of authority by the pharaoh, he gives Joseph appropriate symbols of that authority: the signet ring of the king, the royal robe, and the gold chain to go around his neck. Public acknowledgment of Joseph's authority is made by the chariot ride with the pharaoh and the command to the people to acknowledge this authority as the two chariots passed by.

Additionally Joseph is given a new Egyptian name, Zaphenath-paneah, which probably has the meaning "God speaks and lives." Again this symbolically reflects Joseph's repeated insistence that the meaning of dreams belongs only to God and those whom God reveals it to. His Egyptian wife's name, Asenath, means "she who belongs to the goddess Neith." Her father, Potiphera (= "the one whom Re gave") was a priest of the Egyptian god Re at the city of On, which is also known as Heliopolis, some seven miles

northeast of Cairo, and was a center of worship of this major Egyptian god.

In verses 45b-46, we find Joseph affirming his authority over all the nation of Egypt in a public trip to the various regions of the country so that there would be the direct knowledge by Egyptians everywhere in the country that he was now in charge.

Quite fascinatingly we now see the thirty year old realizing the dream of his youth: "Listen to this dream that I dreamed. There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf" (37:6-7), and "Look, I have had another dream: the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me" (37:9). But circumstances between then and now have refined the pride and arrogance from him so that he can humbly use the realized dream for the purposes of God.

What can we learn from this passage? For one thing, Joseph models humility before the pharaoh mixed with boldness in his interpretation of the dream. God was given the credit for knowing what was going to happen; Joseph never diminishes that understanding by pride or arrogance. Now with things going great for him, he still recognizes the significant role that God was playing in all this. Secondly, even those the insight into the future given from God through Joseph to the pharaoh highlighted what lay ahead, it did so only in the broadest of contours, not in exact details. What we see here is not fortune telling with tones of magic or superstition attached; rather, God provided enough information about the future so that human wisdom and ingenuity could be used to make the detailed preparations for the future. Divine revelation doesn't supplant common sense! The two are complementary to each other, not hostile. Thirdly, Joseph's religion and religious convictions could work in the context of very different, contrary religious systems that surrounded him. Just because the pharaoh and the other Egyptians didn't believe in his God like he did, he didn't recoil back and refuse to have contact with them. As the remaining Story of Joseph will demonstrate, this interaction didn't contaminate Joseph's religious convictions. He remained true to God throughout his life.

b. Effective Leadership, vv. 47-57

NASB

47 During the seven years of plenty the land brought forth abundantly. 48 So he gathered all the food of *these* seven years which occurred in the land of Egypt and placed the food in the cities; he placed in every city the food from its own surrounding fields. 49 Thus Joseph stored up grain in great abundance like the sand of the sea, until he stopped measuring *it*, for it was beyond measure. 50 Now before the year of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph, whom Asenath, the daughter of Potiphera priest of On, bore to him. 51 Joseph named the first-born Manasseh, "For," *he said*, "God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household." 52 He named the second Ephraim, "For," *he said*, "God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction." 53 When the seven

NRSV

47 During the seven plenteous years the earth produced abundantly. 48 He gathered up all the food of the seven years when there was plenty^{F164} in the land of Egypt, and stored up food in the cities; he stored up in every city the food from the fields around it. 49 So Joseph stored up grain in such abundance — like the sand of the sea — that he stopped measuring it; it was beyond measure. 50 Before the years of famine came, Joseph had two sons, whom Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, bore to him. 51 Joseph named the first-born Manasseh,^{F165} "For," he said, "God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house." 52 The second he named Ephraim,^{F166} "For God has made me fruitful in the land of my misfortunes." 53 The seven years of

NLT

47 And sure enough, for the next seven years there were bumper crops everywhere. 48 During those years, Joseph took a portion of all the crops grown in Egypt and stored them for the government in nearby cities. 49 After seven years, the granaries were filled to overflowing. There was so much grain, like sand on the seashore, that the people could not keep track of the amount. 50 During this time, before the arrival of the first of the famine years, two sons were born to Joseph and his wife, Asenath, the daughter of Potiphera, priest of Heliopolis. 51 Joseph named his older son Manasseh,^{F124} for he said, "God has made me forget all my troubles and the family of my father." 52 Joseph named his second son Ephraim,^{F125} for he said, "God has made me fruitful

years of plenty which had been in the land of Egypt came to an end, 54 and the seven years of famine began to come, just as Joseph had said, then there was famine in all the lands, but in all the land of Egypt there was bread. 55 So when all the land of Egypt was famished, the people cried out to Pharaoh for bread; and Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, "Go to Joseph; whatever he says to you, you shall do." 56 When the famine was spread over all the face of the earth, then Joseph opened all the storehouses, and sold to the Egyptians; and the famine was severe in the land of Egypt. 57 The people of all the earth came to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph, because the famine was severe in all the earth.

plenty that prevailed in the land of Egypt came to an end; 54 and the seven years of famine began to come, just as Joseph had said. There was famine in every country, but throughout the land of Egypt there was bread. 55 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." 56 And since the famine had spread over all the land, Joseph opened all the storehouses, ^{F167} and sold to the Egyptians, for the famine was severe in the land of Egypt. 57 Moreover, all the world came to Joseph in Egypt to buy grain, because the famine became severe throughout the world.

in this land of my suffering." 53 At last the seven years of plenty came to an end. 54 Then the seven years of famine began, just as Joseph had predicted. There were crop failures in all the surrounding countries, too, but in Egypt there was plenty of grain in the storehouses. 55 Throughout the land of Egypt the people began to starve. They pleaded with Pharaoh for food, and he told them, "Go to Joseph and do whatever he tells you." 56 So with severe famine everywhere in the land, Joseph opened up the storehouses and sold grain to the Egyptians. 57 And people from surrounding lands also came to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph because the famine was severe throughout the world.

Footnotes:

F164: Sam Gk: MT [the seven years that were]

F165: That is [Making to forget]

F166: From a Hebrew word meaning [to be fruitful]

F167: Gk Vg Compare Syr: Heb [opened all that was in] (or, [among]) [them]

Footnotes:

F124: Manasseh sounds like a Hebrew term that means "causing to forget."

F125: Ephraim sounds like a Hebrew term that means "fruitful."

Comments:

This passage breaks up into three segments: the preparations for the famine (vv. 47-49), the interruption to describe the birth of two sons (vv. 50-52), the distribution of food during the famine (53-57).

The first seven years of Joseph's leadership witnessed bountiful crops. Joseph wisely stored up massive amounts of food supplies during this time. One must remember that in ancient Egypt no one but the pharaoh owned property; everything in the entire nation belong lock, stock, and barrel to the ruler. The people were thus especially dependent on him for support and assistance. Joseph, with the pharaoh's authority backing him, could then make whatever decisions deemed necessary about how much of the harvests to set aside in reserve. He used wisdom in setting up warehouses in every Egyptian city that by the end of the seven years were bulging over with reserve supplies.

During this time Joseph became a papa as well. His firstborn son was named Manasseh, whose name highlights the good times now that enabled Joseph to overcome any bitterness about his hardships that may have been present as well as loneliness from being cut off from his birth family back in Caanan. A second son was named Ephraim with the emphasis upon the productivity of Joseph's life now. Both the descendants of both these boys would later form two of the twelve tribes of Israel.

With the seven years of famine set in, the Egyptians cried out to the pharaoh for help and he directed them to Joseph for assistance. The storehouses all over the land were opened up and needed food was provided to everyone. The last verse indicates that the famine spread far beyond Egypt with the result that outsiders came to Egypt to buy food, thus helping to enrich the pharaoh. This verse sets the stage for the following episode of Joseph's brothers coming to Egypt for help.

What can we learn from this passage? The Believer's Church Bible Commentary (Genesis, iPreach

online) contains a very helpful summation of chapters 39-41 that I now quote:

“The pilgrimage of Joseph from slave to vice-regent parallels the journey of Israel as escapees from Egypt to the nation under Solomon, the life of David from shepherd’s helper to king, and the story of Jesus from manger to the right hand of God. The biblical tradition of the triumphant rise of a faithful person of low estate to a place of power and honor is not the only path the faithful travel, but it is the journey of God’s promise.

“This story of Joseph, who through wisdom and patience becomes vice-regent, depends on the hidden presence of God ([39:21](#), [23](#); [41:37](#)). The presence of God brings life in the place of death, honor instead of humiliation, and fertility over sterility. The biblical stories of such triumph differ in the role ascribed to humankind. Sometimes the victory happens almost in spite of the individual’s behavior, for example, with Jacob. In other stories the behavior of the individual is a model of virtue, as with Joseph. But in either case triumph in the story depends not on the prowess of the people, but the presence of God, Immanuel ([Mt. 1:20-23](#)).

“We must not forget the danger of such triumphalism. Quite easily the triumphant community can presume on the presence of God or presume that divine presence guarantees success. Job knows a different road and Stephen a different result. Job receives honor, wealth, and position, but only after he realizes that God’s visitation does not always bring good fortune ([Job 7:17-19](#); [16:6-17](#)). Stephen’s life ends with stones, albeit with the faith that stones will not finally end his story ([Acts 7:59-60](#)). God’s presence does not always bring triumph, nor does God bring good fortune only to the virtuous. Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age ([Mt. 28:20](#)), whether life ends triumphantly on a throne or painfully beneath stones or on a cross....

“Joseph must deal with the presence of imperial power as well as with the presence of God. Sometimes that power works for him, elevating him in the house of Potiphar and the royal court. At other times the imperial power enslaves him further, as in the episode with the wife of Potiphar. The temptation of that situation for Joseph, at least as the text comes to us, does not lie in sexual attraction. We are told that Joseph is attractive. But we know nothing about the woman, not her appearance, not even her name. We know only that she is the master’s wife. She has the power that could destroy Joseph. Joseph chooses to disobey the illegitimate request of the powerful. He pays a high price, though not as high as others have paid.

“The story does not cast imperial power in a one-sidedly negative way. Royal power can work for life as well as against it, can lift up as well as destroy. In our story it does both. For Joseph, royal power is dangerous, but not evil. He lives sometimes as victim and sometimes as agent of that power. Nevertheless, for all its force, royal power does not control the future. The power of dreams exceeds the power of Pharaoh (Brueggemann, 1982:322-323).

“Joseph appears in this story as one who lives the virtues celebrated in the ancient Near East, virtues that we too hold dear: patience in the face of unjust suffering, steadfast loyalty in the face of threat to one’s position and even life, forthrightness before power. In that way the narrative presents Joseph as a model person, a hero figure. Such a presentation provides an excellent way to illustrate the virtues which the tradition wants to pass on to the next generation. Even while seeking to instill those virtues in God’s people, the tradition knows that the heroes of the faith also hurt and stumble when they suffer or confront power. In the face of the threat from the powerful, sometimes the faithful lie and deny like Abraham ([Gen. 12:11-13](#)) and Peter ([Mark 14:66-71](#)). When forced to endure unjust suffering, God’s people at times cry out of their pain like Naomi ([Ruth 1:20-21](#)) or rage against God like Job ([Job 7:11-21](#)), or even express their sense of abandonment by God like Jesus ([Mark 15:34](#); [Ps. 22:1](#)). The patience of Joseph and the rage of Job, the steadfast loyalty of Ruth and the tears of Naomi, belong together in the community of faith.

“In this narrative God’s future impinges on the human present through dreams. The dreamers, Joseph, the cupbearer, the baker, even Pharaoh, know that the power of the present does not automatically control the future. The future belongs to God. The present must adjust to God’s future, lest the fat cattle be eaten by the lean and there is no food.”