

Comments on Genesis 39

In this chapter, note the immediate sharp change in the Lord's blessing of Joseph with the hand of providence, as compared to the preceding chapter where Judah's existence is largely ignored and his sons are cursed and killed.

Where Judah effectively becomes a Canaanite and suffers for it, Joseph lives among Egyptians but does not become an Egyptian and is blessed for it.

The implicit theological message to reader is that difficult circumstances do not give an excuse for compromising your morals. And, if you do not compromise, the Lord will bless you regardless of your difficult circumstances.

The other clear contrast between this chapter and the previous one is the composition of the text. The previous chapter is messy in both subject and composition. There are clear literary queues in ch. 38, noted in the comments on that chapter, but the text itself is not well structured, as it is a linear presentation of events. This chapter is well-written with clear rhetorical connections through the text tied to the theology. Alter notes:

This chapter is the most elegantly symmetrical episode in Genesis. It comprises an introductory narrative frame (verses 1-6), a closing frame (20-23) that elaborately echoes the introductory verses, and the central story of the failed seduction, which is intricately linked to the framing verses by a network of recurring thematic key words. (Robert Alter, *Five Books of Moses*, page 221)

Alter then includes a number of notes in his commentary on this chapter with additional details. Review of his comments is recommended for in-depth study of this chapter.

The theological implications taken from the difference in literary style in between chapters are that in ch. 38, Judah's sins left him without the Lord providence in his life and therefore wandering through a series of difficult and unpleasant experiences. In the present chapter, Joseph is faced with hardship that is not of his own making, so the Lord provides for and protects him with divine oversight that controls the disorder and furnishes favorable outcomes. Judah suffers in his self-created misfortunes, while Joseph prospers despite his.

¹And Joseph was brought down to Egypt; and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him of the

hands of the Ishmeelites, which had brought him down thither. ² And the LORD was with Joseph, and he was a prosperous man; and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian. ³ And his master saw that the LORD was with him, and that the LORD made all that he did to prosper in his hand. ⁴ And Joseph found grace in his sight, and he served him: and he made him overseer over his house, and all that he had he put into his hand. ⁵ And it came to pass from the time that he had made him overseer in his house, and over all that he had, that the LORD blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; and the blessing of the LORD was upon all that he had in the house, and in the field. ⁶ And he left all that he had in Joseph's hand; and he knew not ought he had, save the bread which he did eat. And Joseph was a goodly person, and well favoured.

v1-6 Joseph is taken to Egypt and is bought by Potiphar, a man of some prominence to Pharaoh (v. 1). Joseph works in the Egyptian's house and is blessed and prospered by the Lord (v. 2). Potiphar recognizes Joseph's successes (v. 3) and promotes him to head of household (v. 4). Joseph's providentially blessed condition benefits all around him in every way, even though they were Egyptians, not Israelites (v. 5). Potiphar has Joseph run his entire household (v. 6).

v1 repeats the content of 37:36 for continuity after the interruption of Judah's narrative in ch. 38.

v2 Joseph, despite being a slave owned by an Egyptian, is blessed by the Lord for his being good. The clear implication is a person being a slave is not something the Lord cares about, the Lord's concern is over the character of the person and their behavior. Not their social position in a worldly setting.

v3-5 The text suggests Potiphar and his household aren't converted religiously or spiritually to worship the Lord, but recognize Joseph's successes and they promote him and take advantage of his natural skills. Note the text says the Lord blessed the Egyptians for Joseph's sake. It was Joseph's good behavior that resulted in them being blessed, not their own good behavior.

v6 The text indicates Joseph was running Potiphar's household, not his professional activities. What is implied is Potiphar was free to pursue his professional career without the encumbrance of dealing with the management of his household affairs, which he left entirely to Joseph.

"And Joseph was a goodly person, and well favoured.", this last line of v. 6 should have been included in v. 7 as the first line. The KJV translation obscures the intended message. The NAS renders it "Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance." The JPS renders it "Now Joseph was well built and handsome." The intent is to transition from Joseph's conscientiousness and diligence in serving his master, to the his superficial appearance, which lead to trouble with his master's wife, which is the subject of v. 7-18.

Joseph's mother, Rachel, is described using the same exact words in 29:17. Just as Rachel was exceptionally attractive, so is her son Joseph.

⁷ And it came to pass after these things, that his master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph; and she said, Lie with me. ⁸ But he refused, and said unto his master's wife, Behold, my master wotteth not what is with me in the house, and he hath committed all that he hath to my hand; ⁹ There is none greater in this house than I; neither hath he kept back any thing from me but thee, because thou art his wife: how then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?

¹⁰ And it came to pass, as she spake to Joseph day by day, that he hearkened not unto her, to lie by her, or to be with her.

¹¹ And it came to pass about this time, that Joseph went into the house to do his business; and there was none of the men of the house there within. ¹² And she caught him by his garment, saying, Lie with me: and he left his garment in her hand, and fled, and got him out. ¹³ And it came to pass, when she saw that he had left his garment in her hand, and was fled forth, ¹⁴ That she called unto the men of her house, and spake unto them, saying, See, he hath brought in an Hebrew unto us to mock us; he came in unto me to lie with me, and I cried with a loud voice: ¹⁵ And it came to pass, when he heard that I lifted up my voice and cried, that he left his garment with me, and fled, and got him out. ¹⁶ And she laid up his garment by her, until his lord came home. ¹⁷ And she spake unto him according to these words, saying, The Hebrew servant, which thou hast brought unto us, came in unto me to mock me: ¹⁸ And it came to pass, as I lifted up my voice and cried, that he left his garment with me, and fled out.

v7-18 Joseph is an attractive man (v. 6) and as Joseph moves into increasing positions of power in Potiphar's household, Potiphar's wife takes notice of him (v. 7). Joseph declines her advances, saying he is loyal to her husband (v. 8) and will not offend God with this sin (v. 9).

She continues attempts to seduce him by degrees, encouraging him to simply lay next to her, and spend time with her, but he persistently refuses (v. 10).

She waits for a moment when there are no other people in the house and Joseph comes in to do his job (v. 11). She insists he have sex with her and forcefully grabs him by his clothing, he refuses and is forced to escape from her (v. 12). After he leaves, she realizes she has an article of his clothing (v. 13), determines she will never seduce him, and chooses to punish him by framing him for attempted rape (v. 14-18).

v7 The text describes Potiphar's estate as being composed of house and lands, suggesting it is large. As such, it is likely there were multiple slaves, hence the other "men of the house" in v. 11. Joseph was apparently overlooked by Potiphar's wife on the estate until he rose to prominence in the house as overseer. This would have brought him into contact with her as he was running everything and would have only deferred to her in Potiphar's absence. At this point, she takes an interest in him that exceeds his professional duties.

v9 "sin against God", Joseph has matured and recognizes there are spiritual consequences to his actions. He also recognizes he has been blessed by the Lord for the good position he presently enjoys.

v10 When her overt attempt (v. 7) fails (v. 8-9), she attempts seduction by degrees to wear his resolve down. She just wants him to spend time with her, and lay down next to her. But, he remains on guard and refuses.

The standard reading on this text is Potiphar's wife was an attractive woman and the proposition was a temptation. However, there is nothing in the text to suggest that. Only that she was in a position of power over him, and that she did everything in her power to compromise him. Yes, Joseph clearly stuck to his morals in rejecting her, but it is entirely possible he may not have been tempted at all.

v14-17 "he hath brought in an Hebrew unto us to mock us...The Hebrew servant, which thou hast brought unto us, came in unto me to mock me", Potiphar's wife is pitting all of them against Joseph and faulting her husband in front of everyone, ensuring swift decisive action against Joseph. There is no opportunity for Joseph to defend himself in this situation. Potiphar's wife is skilled at manipulating people. If any of the household

servants suspect her, they would certainly be in fear of the same fate if they were to voice concerns.

¹⁹ And it came to pass, when his master heard the words of his wife, which she spake unto him, saying, After this manner did thy servant to me; that his wrath was kindled. ²⁰ And Joseph's master took him, and put him into the prison, a place where the king's prisoners were bound: and he was there in the prison. ²¹ But the LORD was with Joseph, and shewed him mercy, and gave him favour in the sight of the keeper of the prison. ²² And the keeper of the prison committed to Joseph's hand all the prisoners that were in the prison; and whatsoever they did there, he was the doer of it. ²³ The keeper of the prison looked not to any thing that was under his hand; because the LORD was with him, and that which he did, the LORD made it to prosper.

v19-23 Potiphar hears his wife's complaint and believes her (v. 19), so he puts Joseph in prison (v. 20). The Lord protects Joseph and the jailer is favorably disposed to him (v. 21), eventually putting him in charge of the prison operations (v. 22-23).

Joseph's personal situation goes from slave to prisoner, but, regardless, the Lord watches over him and protects and prospers him. Potiphar's wife punishes Joseph for failing to capitulate, but the Lord's power is greater, and Joseph ends up in favorable circumstances, even in jail.

Reading through the chapter, one has to wonder if the text is suggestion Joseph's charisma is overwhelming, or the Lord's providence is miraculously overpowering. But, it could be as simple as Joseph being literate and willing to work despite being in difficult or unpleasant circumstances, as it is not until the next chapter something completely out of the ordinary occurs, with the interpretation of dreams.

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