

General Comments on Genesis 40-45

One matter spanning these chapters is the issue of Joseph's going into slavery. In 40:15 it states, "For in truth, I was kidnaped from the land of the Hebrews" (JPS). But in 45:4 it has Joseph saying to his brothers, "I am your brother Joseph, he whom you sold into Egypt" (JPS). The statement in 45:4 must mean "he whom you [caused to be sold] into Egypt".

It is plain the brothers did not directly sell Joseph to the Ishmaelites, as he was first found by the Midianites, who then sold him to the Ishmaelites. The brothers later had the same plan, but there was no collusion between them and the Midianites. It is only after Joseph is apprized of the facts of the matter concerning his brothers (cp. 42:21-22) that he realizes their initial purpose was to "intend [him] harm" (cp. 50:20). Previous to that he assumes it was the Midianites who kidnaped him. Thus, Joseph must have initially thought his brothers just threw him in the pit, and it was the Midianites who pulled him out to what he thought was his rescue, only to discover their intent was to kidnap and sell him to the Ishmaelites. This would reconcile the "kidnaped" and "you sold me" statements, and indicate that it was his brothers who caused him to be sold, and did not directly sell him.

Another general point would be that Joseph, although starting out a spoiled brat, ends up a solid man. Despite living among Egyptians, whose practices are quite idolatrous and lascivious, he does not give in to their ways and remains firm in his moral and religious convictions. All of this and he even marries an Egyptian woman and raises two sons who turn out to be pretty good. This is in sharp contrast to Dinah and Judah of the preceding chapters. Thus, while the Torah warns against fraternizing with Gentiles, it does show that it is not impossible to be among them without being like them.

Another point worth mentioning is we see at work here the Lord as a social engineer. In these chapters we see Joseph cured of his brattiness (37:2-11), the whole family ends up repentant (37:35, 42:20-24), and the lineage of Abraham is preserved (45:4-8).

In particular the text dwells quite a bit on the exoneration of both Joseph and Judah through adversity. In his childhood, Joseph's dreams are a source of personal pride and lead to family contention. However, as he grows up and is stripped of pride, his dreams and ability to interpret them become a tool to help others. Judah we find out is not doing well at all. He leaves home to live amongst Gentiles and marries a Gentile woman. He has lousy sons who end up offending God and being cursed for it.

But, he ultimately returns home to family contrite and willing to sacrifice his own life (44:12-34 via 43:8-9). Also note the incredible pathos of these two individuals as the family comes together in Egypt. Judah's impassioned plea for Benjamin's life is one of the most heart touching passages in the Bible, and Joseph's reaction is to weep uncontrollably. These are men who have had their hearts softened by tribulation.

Comments on Genesis 40

After the afflictions of being sold into slavery (cf. ch. 37) and being tempted by his master's wife and subsequently jailed because of her treachery (cf. ch. 39), Joseph has been chastened and tested. He is now a young man whom the Lord favors and blesses. Joseph's transformation into maturity can be seen in this chapter where his ability to interpret dreams is perceived by him as a gift from God given to him to help others (v. 8), as opposed to a means of exalting himself over others (cf. 37:5-11).

This chapter largely serves to set the context of the next chapter wherein Joseph lands in the court of Pharaoh. He ends up in the court of Pharaoh in the next chapter as a result of meeting a couple Pharaoh's chief stewards and interpreting their dreams in this chapter.

1 AND it came to pass after these things, [that] the butler of the king of Egypt and [his] baker had offended their lord the king of Egypt. 2 And Pharaoh was wroth against two [of] his officers, against the chief of the butlers, and against the chief of the bakers. 3 And he put them in ward in the house of the captain of the guard, into the prison, the place where Joseph [was] bound. 4 And the captain of the guard charged Joseph with them, and he served them: and they continued a season in ward.

v1-4 Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker offend him (v. 1-2) so he throws them in prison, the same prison which Joseph is in (v. 3), but is effectively running (cf. 39:21-23). The captain of the guard has Joseph watch over them and attend to them, and they spend quite some time there in the prison (v. 4).

v2 The chief cupbearer and chief baker were prominent characters because they were very close to Pharaoh and would therefore have his political ear. They were also stewards over what he ate and drank. Thus, they were prime targets for political intrigue and prime suspects when intrigue was discovered.

As the events turn out, the baker ended up being indicted in whatever intrigue was discovered and was executed, while the cupbearer was exonerated.

5 And they dreamed a dream both of them, each man his dream in one night, each man according to the interpretation of his dream, the butler and the baker of the king of Egypt, which [were] bound in the prison. 6 And Joseph came in unto them in the morning, and looked upon them, and, behold, they [were] sad. 7 And he asked Pharaoh's officers that [were] with him in the ward of his lord's house, saying, Wherefore look ye [so] sadly to day? 8 And they said unto him, We have dreamed a dream, and [there is] no interpreter of it. And Joseph said unto them, [Do] not interpretations [belong] to God? tell me [them], I pray you.

9 And the chief butler told his dream to Joseph, and said to him, In my dream, behold, a vine [was] before me; 10 And in the vine [were] three branches: and it [was] as though it budded, [and] her blossoms shot forth; and the clusters thereof brought forth ripe grapes: 11 And Pharaoh's cup [was] in my hand: and I took the grapes, and pressed them into Pharaoh's cup, and I gave the cup into Pharaoh's hand. 12 And Joseph said unto him, This [is] the interpretation of it: The three branches [are] three days: 13 Yet within three days shall Pharaoh lift up thine head, and restore thee unto thy place: and thou shalt deliver Pharaoh's cup into his hand, after the former manner when thou wast his butler.

14 But think on me when it shall be well with thee, and shew kindness, I pray thee, unto me, and make mention of me unto Pharaoh, and bring me out of this house: 15 For indeed I was stolen away out of the land of the Hebrews: and here also have I done nothing that they should put me into the dungeon.

16 When the chief baker saw that the interpretation was good, he said unto Joseph, I also [was] in my dream, and, behold, [I had] three white baskets on my head: 17 And in the uppermost basket [there was] of all manner of bakemeats for Pharaoh; and the birds did eat them out of the basket upon my head. 18 And Joseph answered and said, This [is] the interpretation thereof: The three baskets [are] three days: 19 Yet within three days shall Pharaoh lift up thy head from off thee, and shall hang thee on a tree; and the birds shall eat thy flesh from off thee.

v5-19 After being in jail for some time the cupbearer and baker both have dreams on the same night (v. 5). The next morning Joseph sees they are both unhappy about something so he asks them why (v. 6-7). They tell him they are sad because they have had dreams which cannot be interpreted. Joseph tells them God knows the interpretation of the dream, so they should tell him their dreams (v. 8), implying God will reveal the meaning of the dream to him. The cupbearer tells the dream and Joseph interprets it favorably (v. 9-13). He then asks the cupbearer to remember the act of kindness done him so as to exonerate him from his unjust imprisonment (v. 14-15). The baker then relates his dream to

Joseph and the interpretation is not a favorable one (v. 16-19).

v8 "Do not interpretations belong to God?", the Jewish Publication Society translation renders this "Surely God can interpret!" Joseph ascribes his ability to interpret dreams to God, he therefore sees it as a spiritual gift that is at least somewhat revelatory in nature. He makes a similar statement in 41:16. The implication Joseph is making is that God has given them the dream, so God knows its meaning and can reveal it.

v14-15 While Joseph is doing reasonably well despite the circumstances, he still wants out of jail and to be treated fairly. He sees the present situation as being a way out, and it is, but he has to wait another two years before it delivers him, cf. 41:1. The Lord has provided the means of getting Joseph out of jail, but has to wait quite some time for the Lord to engineer the situation that suits both their needs.

v15 "I was stolen away", i.e., kidnaped.

v17 "bakemeats", i.e., baked goods, food.

v19 "hang thee on a tree", while this sounds like a hanging via hangman's noose, it is referring to being impaled.

20 And it came to pass the third day, [which was] Pharaoh's birthday, that he made a feast unto all his servants: and he lifted up the head of the chief butler and of the chief baker among his servants. 21 And he restored the chief butler unto his butlership again; and he gave the cup into Pharaoh's hand: 22 But he hanged the chief baker: as Joseph had interpreted to them. 23 Yet did not the chief butler remember Joseph, but forgot him.

v20-23 The interpretation of the dreams provided by Joseph comes to pass (v. 22b) three days later when a feast is held. The cup bearer is restored to his position (v. 21) and the baker is executed by being impaled (v. 22a). But, the cupbearer forgets about Joseph and does nothing for him (v. 23).

v23 While the cupbearer presently "forgets" about Joseph, he does ultimately remember him, cf. 41:9-13. Whether the cup bearer really does honestly forget about Joseph in his excitement over being exonerated, or if he is callous or indifferent is not entirely clear. In 41:9 he confesses his fault at not remembering Joseph, which would suggest the former over the latter.

Copyright © 2013 by S. Kurt Neumiller <kurt.neumiller@gmail.com>. All rights reserved. No part of this text may be reproduced in any form or by any means for commercial gain without the express written consent of the author. Digital or printed copies may be freely made and distributed for personal and public non-commercial use.