

GENESIS 41

Genesis 41:1–16. Pharaoh’s Dreams

Two years after the events of Genesis 40, the pharaoh had two dreams, which both follow the same basic pattern as one another. In the first, seven full and healthy cows were devoured by seven gaunt and sickly cows (41:2–4), and in the second, a stalk of grain with seven full and healthy ears is devoured by a seven-eared grain stalk that was thin and scorched (verses 5–7).

In both the Bible and ancient Egypt, there are two different kinds of revelatory dreams. First, there are message dreams, where a deity or divine messenger directly appears and delivers a message. These dreams are straightforward and require no explanation. Second, there are symbolic dreams, where the meaning is obscure and requires interpretation. Not knowing the meaning of a symbolic dream was dangerous because it meant you lacked knowledge about God’s future intentions. If a dream predicted ill effects or catastrophe (as Pharaoh’s dreams did), correctly interpreting it could “protect . . . against the dream.”¹

In Egyptian tradition, kings usually received message dreams, with direct communications from a deity. This reinforced the special relationship the kings, who were seen as the gods’ intermediaries, had with the gods.² Thus, the fact that Pharaoh had *symbolic dreams* in the Joseph story sends a message undermining Egyptian ideology about the pharaoh’s relationship with the gods. Instead of acting as the intermediary, the pharaoh was in need of someone who could act as intermediary on his behalf by interpreting the dream. So he summoned “the magicians” and “wise men” (verse 8). The word used here for “magicians” is *hartummim*, a word derived from an Egyptian term that referred to priests who functioned as professional dream interpreters.³

1 Nili Shupak, “A Fresh Look at the Dreams of the Officials and of Pharaoh in the Story of Joseph (Genesis 40–41) in the Light of Egyptian Dreams,” *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 30 (2005): 113–114.

2 Shupak, “Fresh Look,” 109–110.

3 Shupak, “Fresh Look,” 134–137.

But these dream interpreters were unable to interpret the dream (verse 8). John Gee proposed, “Pharaoh’s dreams would have perplexed the Egyptian priests because a connection with a cow was seen as good, while measuring barley was seen as bad.”⁴ Thus, the two dreams would have seemed to yield contradictory results using traditional Egyptian methods of dream interpretation. The butler, however, remembered that Joseph could interpret dreams and relayed that to Pharaoh (verses 9–13). Thus, Joseph was poised to function as the intermediary between Pharaoh and the true God (verse 16).⁵

Genesis 41:17–32. The Symbolism and Interpretation of the Dreams

After Joseph was summoned, the dreams were recounted a second time (Genesis 41:17–24). The general imagery of the dreams fit the Egyptian setting. “The sight of cows splashing in the Nile waters is typical of Egypt to the present day. . . . [I]n antiquity too cowmen customarily spent a part of the year herding the cattle in the delta swamps. Its lush vegetation was ideal grazing for the livestock. . . . The picture of the ears of grain growing close to the Nile also suits Egypt’s landscape: Egypt was ever a land of cereal growing and of produce export.”⁶

As with the dreams of the butler and the baker, “Joseph . . . does not interpret the [Pharaoh’s] dream the way that the Egyptian dream interpretation manuals would have.” Yet Joseph still “used Egyptian symbols in a way that might have made sense to the Egyptians” when interpreting the dreams.⁷

Dreaming of the number seven, for instance, was a sign that a person was to be rebuked, so it made sense that the dream was warning of a coming punishment.⁸ In a later time period, “the Egyptian word for year (*rnpt*) was written by the drawing of a cow,” which “accords well with the identification of cows with years in the dream’s interpretation,” although this is not attested during Joseph’s time.⁹ On the other hand, “the hieratic sign for grain looks like the hieratic sign for year at the time of Joseph,” so “interpreting seven stalks of grain as years would have made sense to literate Egyptians.”¹⁰ Other aspects of cow and grain symbolism in Egypt accord with details in Joseph’s interpretation of the dream.¹¹

4 John Gee, “Clothes and Cups: The Tangible World of Joseph,” in *From Creation to Sinai: The Old Testament through the Lens of the Restoration*, ed. Daniel L. Belnap and Aaron P. Schade (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2021), 441.

5 Shupak, “Fresh Look,” 138.

6 Shupak, “Fresh Look,” 123.

7 Gee, “Clothes and Cups,” 441.

8 Shupak, “Fresh Look,” 130.

9 Shupak, “Fresh Look,” 121.

10 Gee, “Clothes and Cups,” 441.

11 Shupak, “Fresh Look,” 121–123.

The one odd detail (from an Egyptian perspective) is the coming of an “east wind” to blast and wither the ears of grain (verses 6, 23). In Egypt, it is a southern wind that brings dry, withering heat that kills crops, but in Israel it was an east wind that brought scorching heat and dry sands in from the desert, sometimes devastating crops in a single day.¹² “Even though these climatic conditions were specific to the region of Israel, biblical writers used the ‘east wind’ as a sign of divine judgment when talking about other regions in the ancient Near East as well. . . . ‘East wind’ could thus be used to describe any hot, dry, devastating wind, regardless of which direction it came from.”¹³

Genesis 41:33–49. Preparing for the Famine

As previously noted, the purpose of interpreting a symbolic dream was to help the dreamer prepare for, and thus protect themselves from, any negative outcomes the dream was predicting. So immediately after interpreting the dreams, Joseph offered a plan to Pharaoh for preparing for the seven years of famine (Genesis 41:33–37). Pharaoh then placed Joseph in charge of executing that plan (verses 38–49). Finally, after a long period of slavery and imprisonment, Joseph was elevated to a position of high status, and God’s purposes began to come to fruition.

In a formal ceremony, the pharaoh gave Joseph tokens of investiture—his signet seal, fine linen, and a gold chain or necklace—publicly paraded him in a chariot, and bestowed upon him a new name (verses 41–45). Similar promotion ceremonies are depicted on the tombs of Egyptian officials from the late second millennium BC. These scenes specifically show the reception of signet rings, rolled-up pieces of linen, and a golden collar or necklace, just as in the Joseph story.¹⁴ Joseph’s new name, Zaphnath-paaneah (verse 45), is also Egyptian and either means “the God has said: ‘he will live’” or “[Joseph] who is called Pi-ankh.”¹⁵

Joseph’s exact status and position in the Egyptian bureaucracy is still debated among biblical scholars, but it is generally agreed that Joseph “penetrated the ranks of the highest nobility of the land and was one of the most important officials in the government.”¹⁶ According to John Gee, “Only the highest-ranking officials were allowed to use the king’s seal and act in the king’s stead, making Joseph truly one who was

12 Shupak, “Fresh Look,” 123–124; Kerry M. Hull, “An ‘East Wind’: Old and New World Perspectives,” in *Abinadi: He Came among Them in Disguise*, ed. Shon D. Hopkin (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2018), 169–208.

13 Book of Mormon Central, “Why Did Abinadi Warn the People of an East Wind? (Mosiah 12:6–7),” *KnowWhy* 560 (May 5, 2020).

14 James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1996), 91–93.

15 Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*, 85–86.

16 Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis through Rabbinic Tradition and Modern Scholarship* (New York, NY: Melton Research Center, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1966), 220. See also Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*, 93–95.

‘over all the land of Egypt’ (41:43) and granting him an immense amount of power.”¹⁷ Under Joseph’s direction, excess grain was gathered up and stored over the next seven years (verses 47–49).

Genesis 41:50–57

Joseph married Asenath, the daughter of an Egyptian priest, and had two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim (Genesis 41:45, 50–52).

As the seven years of plenty came to a close, a famine came not only in Egypt but also over “all the face of the earth” (verse 56). Thus, Joseph’s family in Canaan was affected by the resulting lack of food and would eventually have to come down to Egypt to request food from Joseph himself (42:1–6). And so, the fulfillment of Pharaoh’s dreams sets the stage for the fulfillment of Joseph’s dreams in which his brothers bowed before him.

Credits

Author: Neal Rappleye

General Editor: Taylor Halverson

Associate Editor: Morgan Tanner

Senior Editor: Sarah Whitney Johnson

Assistant Editor: Verlanne Johnson

ScripturePlus Design: Jasmin Gimenez Rappleye

¹⁷ Gee, “Clothes and Cups,” 441.