



Genesis - Chapter Thirty Nine

II. Genesis 11:27-50:26 - Patriarchal History (continues)

II.c Genesis 37:1-50:26 - Jacob's Descendants (continues)

Summary of Chapter Thirty Nine

Despite being in Egyptian slavery, the Lord is with Joseph and he prospers as the overseer of Potiphar's household. However, his master's wife continually attempts to seduce Joseph and his continued refusal infuriated her. Her final attempt led to Joseph fleeing the house but not before lady managed to grab his garment from him. She made accusations to her other staff that Joseph had tried to rape her, an accusation that led to the arrest and imprisonment of Joseph. However, the Lord remained with Joseph and the chief jailer placed all the other prisoners in Joseph's care as he recognised his gifting.

II.c.iii Genesis 39:1-23 - Joseph and Potiphar's Wife

The Lord's presence with Joseph in Egypt enables him to find favour with first Potiphar and then the keeper of the prison. While Joseph's refusal to lie with Potiphar's wife results in his being wrongly imprisoned, his personal integrity is not compromised. Implicit in this account is the idea that God's presence with Joseph is linked to Joseph's commitment to the Lord.

¹ Now Joseph was taken down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there.

Genesis 39:1

This verse, which echoes 37:36, reintroduces Joseph as the main character of the story. He continues as such until the book ends.

Was taken down to Egypt. The land of Egypt is lower than much of the land of Canaan and therefore people go down to Egypt and up to Canaan. Similar expressions are noted in people travelling to and from Jerusalem, which is at a higher elevation than the surrounding areas, for example: <<*Any of those among you who are of his people – may their God be with them! – are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel – he is the God who is in Jerusalem*>> (Ezra 1:3), and: <<*The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem*>> (John 2:13).

The name Potiphar means devoted to the sun. It was a name connected with the Egyptian religious system.

An officer of Pharaoh. The ancient Hebrew word officer could be translated eunuch. It was a common practice in ancient times to make those highest in the royal courts eunuchs, to ensure they would be wholly devoted to their king. Because this practice was common, the term came to be used for all who served in important positions in a king's court, whether they were actually eunuchs or not. Therefore, even though he had a wife, it cannot be determined if Potiphar was a eunuch. A similar position was held in the Ethiopian courts by the eunuch encountered by Philip; refer to Acts 8:26-39.

The captain of the guard. The idea behind this title means chief of police, or probably more precisely, Potiphar was head of Pharaoh's Secret Service, his personal security force or bodyguard. He was a highly trusted official in the government of Egypt.

² The LORD was with Joseph, and he became a successful man; he was in the house of his Egyptian master. ³ His master saw that the LORD was with him, and that the LORD caused all that he did to prosper in his hands. ⁴ So Joseph found favour in his sight and attended him; he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had. ⁵ From the time that he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had, the LORD blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of the LORD was on all that he had, in house and field.

Genesis 39:2-5

The LORD was with Joseph. Right at the outset, God's presence with Joseph is unambiguously affirmed. Although God never speaks directly to him, as he did to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Joseph's life in Egypt is governed by God's providential care, as Joseph would later recount to his brothers: <<*Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today*>> (Genesis 50:20).

He became a successful man. In spite of having been sold into slavery, Joseph prospers, being promoted to the position of overseer of Potiphar's house.

Those who place their complete trust in God are often rewarded with such success as scripture so often reveals: <<David had success in all his undertakings; for the LORD was with him>> (1 Samuel 18:14), <<The LORD was with him; wherever he went, he prospered. He rebelled against the king of Assyria and would not serve him>> (2 Kings 18:7), <<They rose early in the morning and went out into the wilderness of Tekoa; and as they went out, Jehoshaphat stood and said, 'Listen to me, O Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem! Believe in the LORD your God and you will be established; believe his prophets'>> (2 Chronicles 20:20), and: <<Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper>> (Psalm 1:1-3). Success, of course, can be measured in so many different ways throughout life.

The repeated references to the LORD in these verses emphasise that Joseph's success is due to God's presence with him. By indicating that divine blessing comes through Joseph, even on those whom he served, i.e. the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake, the narrator picks up on one of the important elements of the promises made to the patriarchs, refer to 12:3, 18:18, 22:17 and 30:27 as examples of this.

^{6a} So he left all that he had in Joseph's charge; and, with him there, he had no concern for anything but the food that he ate.

Genesis 39:6a

He left all that he had in Joseph's charge. Such was Joseph's character and integrity that his master gave everything over to his care, having no concern for anything but the food that he ate.

Clearly, Joseph rose to the top, but it took a while to happen. Joseph was 17 years old when he was sold into slavery (37:2). He was 30 when Pharaoh promoted him (41:46), and had been in prison for at least two years before that (41:1). So he was in Potiphar's house for up to 11 years. It may have taken eleven years for the full measure of God's blessing to be accomplished in Joseph's life.

Eleven years seems like a long time. Many think if advancement is from God, it must come quickly. Sometimes this is the case, but not usually. Normally, God allows good things to develop slowly. Human children have the longest

development time both in the womb and in childhood compared to animals. It takes many years for an acorn to become an oak.

^{6b} Now Joseph was handsome and good-looking. ⁷ And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, 'Lie with me.' ⁸ But he refused and said to his master's wife, 'Look, with me here, my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my hand. ⁹ He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?'

Genesis 39:6b-9

Handsome and good-looking. This echoes 29:17, describing Joseph's mother Rachel. This brief observation explains why Potiphar's wife is drawn to him. Joseph's appearance was of special note. The Bible only calls two other men handsome or beautiful: David (1 Samuel 16:12) and his son Absalom (2 Samuel 14:25). Although it does also appear to apply to Daniel and his companions: <<*Then the king commanded his palace master Ashpenaz to bring some of the Israelites of the royal family and of the nobility, young men without physical defect and handsome, versed in every branch of wisdom, endowed with knowledge and insight, and competent to serve in the king's palace; they were to be taught the literature and language of the Chaldeans*>> (Daniel 1:3-4).

Joseph's refusal to lie, i.e. have sexual intercourse with her, contrasts sharply with the behaviour of Reuben and Judah, refer to 35:22 and 38:15-18 respectively. His integrity does not permit him to betray his master, and especially God, by committing adultery.

If Potiphar were indeed a eunuch then his wife may have sought sexual activity elsewhere. Her behaviour may or may not have been seen as unacceptable in Egyptian society but, had he been guilty, Joseph's certainly would have been.

Sin against God. Joseph rightly recognises that to give in to Potiphar's wife not only would be an offense against his master, who has trusted him with everything he owns, but would equally be an offense against God, as confirmed by: <<*Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgement*>> (Psalm 51:4). Joseph exercises authority without seeing this as an opportunity to betray or exploit others. Wise words support his actions: <<*For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching a light, and the reproofs of discipline are the way of life, to preserve you from the wife of another, from the smooth tongue of the adulteress*>> (Proverbs 6:23-24).

The motif of the 'spurned seductress' appears elsewhere in ancient Near Eastern literature. In Egypt, the story called the 'Tale of Two Brothers' tells of two brothers, one of whom spurns the advances of the other's wife.

¹⁰ And although she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not consent to lie beside her or to be with her. ¹¹ One day, however, when he went into the house to do his work, and while no one else was in the house, ¹² she caught hold of his garment, saying, 'Lie with me!' But he left his garment in her hand, and fled and ran outside.

Genesis 39:10-12

He would not consent to lie beside her. Joseph consistently rejects the advances of Potiphar's wife. He knows that it would be a sin and that it would cause harm to others; it would be a betrayal of his master's trust.

One day, however, in the course of doing his normal work, Potiphar's wife caught hold of Joseph by his garment. Unable to free himself, Joseph flees, leaving his garment in her hand. This would not have left him to run out of the house naked for it refers to his outer garment. As in 37:31-33, Joseph's garment plays an important role in the story and, as before, is used to deceive other people.

Joseph fled and ran outside. Had he remained he would have had a stronger claim to his innocence. He would have known that his departure from the scene would probably incriminate him but he would face punishment rather than be sinful.

Whether this is seen simply as human temptation or God testing Joseph matters not; Joseph showed excellent character in serving both his master and God. Many see a link between this and the temptations that Christ overcame in the wilderness; refer to Matthew 4:1-11, Mark 1:12-13 and Luke 4:1-13.

¹³ When she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled outside, ¹⁴ she called out to the members of her household and said to them, 'See, my husband has brought among us a Hebrew to insult us! He came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice; ¹⁵ and when he heard me raise my voice and cry out, he left his garment beside me, and fled outside.'

Genesis 39:13-15

While Potiphar is still absent, his wife convinces the male members of her household to side with her.

See, my husband has brought among us a Hebrew to insult us! She combines three elements in order to maximise her case against Joseph:

1. She places some of the blame on her husband, for he was responsible for Joseph's presence in the household.
2. By emphasising Joseph's non-Egyptian origin, she exploits a long-standing racial tension that existed between native Egyptians and foreigners from Canaan.
3. She portrays Joseph's action as being directed against the entire household, and not simply her.

Insult, also translated as laugh, recalls 21:9 NIV and 26:8, where it has the connotations of mocking someone and fondling or caressing respectively.

Concerning the term Hebrew here, refer to the comment made on 10:21-32.

¹⁶ Then she kept his garment by her until his master came home, ¹⁷ and she told him the same story, saying, 'The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us, came in to me to insult me; ¹⁸ but as soon as I raised my voice and cried out, he left his garment beside me, and fled outside.'

Genesis 39:16-18

With Joseph's garment as evidence, Potiphar's wife tells to her husband with significant variations what she has already told the men of her household. Once again she focuses on the non-Egyptian background of Joseph, he was a Hebrew, and her husband's poor judgment in bringing him into the household, i.e. whom you have brought among us, and Joseph's exploitation of her, that is, came in to me to insult me, which can be contrasted with v.14, where she states that Joseph 'insults us'. To place further pressure on her husband, she describes Joseph as 'your servant' (v.19).

God would later introduce his law to prevent his people from acting as Potiphar's wife had done: <<*You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour*>> (Exodus 20:16), <<*Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent or those in the right, for I will not acquit the guilty*>> (Exodus 23:7), and: <<*Neither shall you bear false witness against your neighbour*>> (Deuteronomy 5:20). Christ may have superseded the law but much of it is still valid for Christians to follow today.

¹⁹ When his master heard the words that his wife spoke to him, saying, 'This is the way your servant treated me', he became enraged. ²⁰ And Joseph's master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined; he remained there in prison. ²¹ But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love; he gave him

favour in the sight of the chief jailer. ²² The chief jailer committed to Joseph's care all the prisoners who were in the prison, and whatever was done there, he was the one who did it. ²³ The chief jailer paid no heed to anything that was in Joseph's care, because the LORD was with him; and whatever he did, the LORD made it prosper.

Genesis 39:19-23

His master became enraged. That Potiphar was merciful to Joseph may be because he suspected his wife's role in the matter. The anger aroused may have not been directed towards Joseph, but against the wife for manipulating him into a situation where, to save face, he had to dismiss the man who made the whole household run well. Kidner writes: "Death was the only penalty Joseph could reasonably expect. His reprieve presumably owed much to the respect he had won; and Potiphar's mingled wrath and restraint may reflect a faint misgiving about the full accuracy of the charge."

The swiftness with which the narrator reports the imprisonment of Joseph mirrors what happened in reality. As a slave, Joseph had no legal rights. While the reader is not immediately conscious of the significance of Joseph's being imprisoned where the king's prisoners were confined, this will prove significant for future developments.

The law codes of the ancient Near East, including OT legislation, do not employ punishment by imprisonment in jail. Yet the practice is well known and attested in ancient Egyptian literature; therefore, this story fits well with the culture of ancient Egypt.

By echoing much of the language of vv.2-5, these verses imply that Joseph's experience in prison paralleled his earlier experience in Potiphar's house. Because of the LORD's presence with him, Joseph prospers and his integrity becomes clear, for he found favour in the sight of the chief jailer: <<*He caused all who held them captive to show them mercy*>> (Psalm 106:46 NIV), <<*When the ways of people please the LORD, he causes even their enemies to be at peace with them*>> (Proverbs 16:7), and: <<*Now God allowed Daniel to receive favour and compassion from the palace master*>> (Daniel 1:9).