



Genesis - Chapter Forty One

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

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

Summary of Chapter Forty One

This lengthy episode recounts Joseph's dramatic rise in status from being a prisoner in the king's jail to becoming the chief administrator of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh himself. Central to this is Joseph's ability to interpret Pharaoh's dreams, which anticipate seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. Later this will play an important part in bringing Joseph's brothers to Egypt. Joseph's God-given administrative ability is immediately recognised by Pharaoh and prompts his promotion. Throughout this chapter, Joseph consistently acknowledges God as the source of his special gifting.

II.c.v Genesis 41:1-36 - Joseph Interprets Pharaoh's Dream

Two years later Pharaoh had two dreams one night which his people could not interpret. On hearing the chief cupbearer finally remembers Joseph and reports to Pharaoh what had occurred. As a result, Joseph is released from prison and brought before Pharaoh.

He tells Pharaoh that it is God who interprets dreams and, after hearing Pharaoh's account, tells him that the dreams mean there will be seven years of an abundance of crops followed by seven years of severe drought. Joseph advises Pharaoh to use the seven good years to store food for the drought.

¹ After two whole years, Pharaoh dreamed that he was standing by the Nile, ² and there came up out of the Nile seven sleek and fat cows, and they grazed in the reed grass. ³ Then seven other cows, ugly and thin, came up out of the Nile after them, and stood by the other cows on

the bank of the Nile. ⁴ The ugly and thin cows ate up the seven sleek and fat cows. And Pharaoh awoke. ⁵ Then he fell asleep and dreamed a second time; seven ears of grain, plump and good, were growing on one stalk. ⁶ Then seven ears, thin and blighted by the east wind, sprouted after them. ⁷ The thin ears swallowed up the seven plump and full ears. Pharaoh awoke, and it was a dream.

Gen 41:1-7

Pharaoh's two dreams share a common pattern of abundance followed by scarcity. The repetition of this theme in two separate dreams troubles Pharaoh and alerts him to their peculiar nature.

After two whole years. These events take place two years after the chief cupbearer has been released from prison. Joseph is now 30 years old (v.46) and has been in Egypt for about 12 or 13 years (37:2). Refer to Joseph's Timeline in the Supplementary Material on the website.

In Pharaoh's dream, seven fat cows came out of the waters of the Nile and were consumed by seven ugly and thin cows. In a second dream, seven thin ears devoured seven plump ears of wheat. Pharaoh could recognise that the dreams were linked because of both the repetitive nature of the number seven and the fact that the lesser devoured the greater.

Blighted by the east wind. This was the wind that came across the Arabian Desert and brought with it drought and scorching heat. It is frequently used in scripture as a metaphor for destruction; for example: <<*So Moses stretched out his staff over the land of Egypt, and the LORD brought an east wind upon the land all that day and all that night; when morning came, the east wind had brought the locusts*>> (Exodus 10:13), <<*By expulsion, by exile you struggled against them; with his fierce blast he removed them on the day of the east wind*>> (Isaiah 27:8), <<*Like the wind from the east, I will scatter them before the enemy. I will show them my back, not my face, on the day of their calamity*>> (Jeremiah 18:17), <<*But it was plucked up in fury, cast down to the ground; the east wind dried it up; its fruit was stripped off, its strong stem was withered; the fire consumed it*>> (Ezekiel 19:12), <<*Although he may flourish among rushes, the east wind shall come, a blast from the LORD, rising from the wilderness; and his fountain shall dry up, his spring shall be parched. It shall strip his treasury of every precious thing*>> (Hosea 13:15), and: <<*When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, 'It is better for me to die than to live'*>> (Jonah 4:8).

⁸ In the morning his spirit was troubled; so he sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt and all its wise men. Pharaoh told them his dreams, but there was no one who could interpret them to Pharaoh. ⁹ Then the chief cupbearer said to Pharaoh, ‘I remember my faults today. ¹⁰ Once Pharaoh was angry with his servants, and put me and the chief baker in custody in the house of the captain of the guard. ¹¹ We dreamed on the same night, he and I, each having a dream with its own meaning. ¹² A young Hebrew was there with us, a servant of the captain of the guard. When we told him, he interpreted our dreams to us, giving an interpretation to each according to his dream. ¹³ As he interpreted to us, so it turned out; I was restored to my office, and the baker was hanged.’

Genesis 41:8-13

In the morning his spirit was troubled. Pharaoh was not able to simply dismiss his experience as just ordinary dreams but was perturbed by them for he guessed they were of some significance. There are others who are trouble in their spirit but such things: <<*When I say, “My bed will comfort me, my couch will ease my complaint”, then you scare me with dreams and terrify me with visions*>> (Job 7:13-14), <<*In the second year of Nebuchadnezzar’s reign, Nebuchadnezzar dreamed such dreams that his spirit was troubled and his sleep left him*>> (Daniel 2:1), and: <<*I saw a dream that frightened me; my fantasies in bed and the visions of my head terrified me*>> (Daniel 4:5). Jesus too was troubled but for a very different reason, for he knew the fate that awaited him: <<*Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say – “Father, save me from this hour”? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour*>> (John 12:27).

There was no one who could interpret them to Pharaoh. The inability of Pharaoh’s officials to interpret the dreams prompts the chief cupbearer to remember Joseph and his capacity to accurately interpret dreams, as he had done two years previously (40:5-22). His statement: I remember my faults today refers to his failure to recall Joseph earlier rather than the reason why he was imprisoned in the first place.

The magicians of Egypt. These were probably cultic officials who interpreted omens and signs and are not to be confused with modern illusionists who perform to entertain. The fact that Joseph is very successful with dream interpretation, because ‘interpretations belong to God’ (40:8), leads one to believe that God is allowing Joseph is defeating the Egyptians on their own turf.

Joseph’s non-Egyptian origin is indicated by the expression a young Hebrew. Refer to 14:13 and the comment made on 10:21-32.

¹⁴ Then Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and he was hurriedly brought out of the dungeon. When he had shaved himself and changed his clothes, he came in before Pharaoh.

Genesis 41:14

Pharaoh sent for Joseph. The brevity of this verse conveys the speed with which Joseph was brought from prison to Pharaoh's court: <<*The king sent and released him; the ruler of the peoples set him free*>> (Psalm 105:20). Protocol required that he be shaved and changed his clothes before entering Pharaoh's presence: <<*Now wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes*>> (Ruth 3:3a).

The expression out of the dungeon or pit graphically illustrates what it was like for Joseph to be incarcerated in prison.

¹⁵ And Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'I have had a dream, and there is no one who can interpret it. I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it.' ¹⁶ Joseph answered Pharaoh, 'It is not I; God will give Pharaoh a favourable answer.'

Genesis 41:15-16

Joseph responds to Pharaoh by unambiguously stating that God, not Joseph, is the one who will answer Pharaoh's request, just as he had stated in 40:8. Pharaoh gave Joseph a golden opportunity to glorify himself, but Joseph refused. He did not use this as an opportunity to glorify himself before Pharaoh, but only to glorify God. In this respect Joseph is also seen to be like Jesus: <<*I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgement is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me*>> (John 5:30).

God will give Pharaoh a favourable answer. Joseph seems much wiser and perhaps more humble than he did before, considering the way he told his brothers his previous dreams in a self-glorifying way. God's work of character building was being accomplished in Joseph even when he perhaps thought nothing was happening.

¹⁷ Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'In my dream I was standing on the banks of the Nile; ¹⁸ and seven cows, fat and sleek, came up out of the Nile and fed in the reed grass. ¹⁹ Then seven other cows came up after them, poor, very ugly, and thin. Never had I seen such ugly ones in all the land of Egypt. ²⁰ The thin and ugly cows ate up the first seven fat cows, ²¹ but when they had eaten them no one would have known that they had done so, for they were still as ugly as before. Then I awoke. ²² I fell asleep a second time and I saw in my dream seven ears of

grain, full and good, growing on one stalk, ²³ and seven ears, withered, thin, and blighted by the east wind, sprouting after them; ²⁴ and the thin ears swallowed up the seven good ears. But when I told it to the magicians, there was no one who could explain it to me.'

Genesis 41:17-24

In my dream. Pharaoh's description of the dreams repeats, almost word for word, what has been reported by the narrator in vv.1-8. This repetition underlines the importance of the dreams and the impact they had made upon Pharaoh.

They were still as ugly as before. More details of the dream emerge with the second telling. When the skinny cows ate the fat cows, they themselves did not become fat.

²⁵ Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, 'Pharaoh's dreams are one and the same; God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do. ²⁶ The seven good cows are seven years, and the seven good ears are seven years; the dreams are one. ²⁷ The seven lean and ugly cows that came up after them are seven years, as are the seven empty ears blighted by the east wind. They are seven years of famine. ²⁸ It is as I told Pharaoh; God has shown to Pharaoh what he is about to do. ²⁹ There will come seven years of great plenty throughout all the land of Egypt. ³⁰ After them there will arise seven years of famine, and all the plenty will be forgotten in the land of Egypt; the famine will consume the land. ³¹ The plenty will no longer be known in the land because of the famine that will follow, for it will be very grievous. ³² And the doubling of Pharaoh's dream means that the thing is fixed by God, and God will shortly bring it about. ³³ Now therefore let Pharaoh select a man who is discerning and wise, and set him over the land of Egypt. ³⁴ Let Pharaoh proceed to appoint overseers over the land, and take one-fifth of the produce of the land of Egypt during the seven plenteous years. ³⁵ Let them gather all the food of these good years that are coming, and lay up grain under the authority of Pharaoh for food in the cities, and let them keep it. ³⁶ That food shall be a reserve for the land against the seven years of famine that are to befall the land of Egypt, so that the land may not perish through the famine.'

Genesis 41:25-36

Joseph said to Pharaoh. Joseph's speech falls into two parts. Emphasising the divine origin of the dreams, Joseph interprets their meaning to Pharaoh in vv.25-32. He stresses that the twofold revelation indicates that they will be fulfilled soon. In vv.33-36, Joseph outlines the action that Pharaoh ought to take in order to prepare for the seven years of famine. Joseph's instructions are sufficiently detailed to impress Pharaoh deeply.

Pharaoh's dreams are one and the same; God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do. The seven cows and seven heads of grain each represent seven years. There will be seven years of plenty and abundance, followed by another seven years of want and famine. The years of famine will be so bad that the good years will be forgotten.

The doubling of Pharaoh's dream means that the thing is fixed by God, and God will shortly bring it about. Joseph saw the confirming hand of God in the repetition of the dream. He knew the principle of *<<the evidence of two or three witnesses>>* (Deuteronomy 19:15b), even if he did not have it written in scripture yet. The repetition also gave Joseph a sense of urgency.

God will shortly bring it about. Joseph knew the matter was entirely in the hands of God. God had a purpose for the dream, a purpose for the timing, a purpose for the famine, a purpose for Joseph being in jail, and a purpose for everything.

Let Pharaoh select a man who is discerning and wise, and set him over the land of Egypt. God picked a man when he had something to accomplish. He uses people to further his plan as Barnhouse concludes: 'God always works through men performing tasks on the earth.' God had already chosen Joseph who is gracious and wise enough to pass the choice on to Pharaoh for his confirmation.

Let Pharaoh proceed to appoint overseers over the land, and take one-fifth of the produce of the land of Egypt during the seven plenteous years. Joseph showed both his boldness and his gift of administration. No responsible administrator would present such news without also suggesting a plan to meet the coming crisis.

King Ahasuerus was also advised to set up overseers to bring in a crop for him. In his case it was a crop of beautiful women for him to choose a new queen: *<<And let the king appoint commissioners in all the provinces of his kingdom to gather all the beautiful young virgins to the harem in the citadel of Susa under the custody of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women; let their cosmetic treatments be given them>>* (Esther 2:3).

So that the land may not perish through the famine. Joseph sensed there was a reason why God gave this word to Pharaoh. It was so he could prepare for the

coming crisis. This wasn't just gossip from heaven to earth; it was an urgent call to action.

II.c.vi Genesis 41:37-57 - Joseph's Rise to Power

Pharaoh was so impressed with Joseph, both with the detailed way he had interpreted the dream and the wisdom he showed in preparing land to survive the famine that Pharaoh promoted him to his second-in-command, a position of power and influence beyond that of any person other than Pharaoh himself. He gave Joseph his signet as a sign of his new authority, dressed him richly and gave him the Egyptian name Zaphenath-paneah. Joseph was also married to lady from an influential family.

During the seven years of plenty Joseph went throughout all the land of Egypt, personally supervising the storing of food to sustain everyone during the time of famine that was to come. Joseph was thirty years old when he started the work and the narrator reports that he had his first two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, in the period of abundance.

When the famine struck it had a severe impact on the people of Egypt and of the surrounding countries. On the instructions of Pharaoh, Joseph opened the storehouses to feed all the Egyptians and the foreigners who also came to them to buy food.

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?'

Genesis 41:37-38

The spirit of God. Pharaoh recognises that Joseph is enabled by God to perceive things hidden from others. He ascribes this ability to a divine presence within Joseph. While Pharaoh undoubtedly interpreted this according to his own religious outlook, the early readers of Genesis would have understood Joseph's divine empowerment as being consistent with what they recognised as a recurring feature within Israelite religion. On various occasions God empowered people for special service by giving them his Spirit. Examples include: <<***See, I have called by name Bezalel son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah: and I have filled him with divine spirit, with ability, intelligence, and knowledge in every kind of craft***>> (Exodus 31:2-3), <<***The spirit of the LORD came upon him, and he judged Israel; he went out to war, and the LORD gave King Cushan-rishathaim of Aram into his hand; and his hand prevailed over Cushan-rishathaim***>> (Judges 3:10), and: <<***Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah***>> (1 Samuel 16:13).

Ultimately, that same Spirit would be upon Jesus for his earthly ministry: <<*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour*>> (Luke 4:18-19).

This is the first reference to the Holy Spirit since his introduction in the creation account (1:2) and the first indication that he can dwell upon people.

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.'

Genesis 41:39-41

Only with regard to the throne will I be greater than you. Joseph had now gone from the pit to the pinnacle, but it took some 13 years to happen. From the outside, Joseph looked like an immediate success, but it was more than 13 years in the making. Joseph is a good example of a man who seemed to have all the gifts and talents for leadership, but God developed his character and talents over many years. Gifts and talents may be impressive and immediate, but character is what God looks for and always takes time to develop.

I have set you over all the land of Egypt. Joseph is made the vizier, to govern all the people of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh himself.

A document from the Tomb of Rekhmire in the Late Bronze Age tells of the duties of the vizier in Egypt. He is the 'grand steward of all Egypt,' and all activities of state are under his control.

⁴² Removing his signet ring from his hand, Pharaoh put it on Joseph's hand; he arrayed him in garments of fine 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.

Genesis 41:42-43

To signify Joseph's special appointment, Pharaoh presents him with his royal signet ring, dresses him appropriately: <<*The angel said to those who were standing before him, 'Take off his filthy clothes.'* And to him he said, 'See, I have taken your guilt away from you, and I will clothe you in festal apparel.' And I said, 'Let them put a clean turban on his head.' So they put a clean

turban on his head and clothed him in the apparel; and the angel of the LORD was standing by>> (Zechariah 3:4-5), and provides royal transport.

Other men would later be bestowed with similar honour: <<Then Mordecai went out from the presence of the king, wearing royal robes of blue and white, with a great golden crown and a mantle of fine linen and purple, while the city of Susa shouted and rejoiced>> (Esther 8:15), and: <<Then Belshazzar gave the command, and Daniel was clothed in purple, a chain of gold was put around his neck, and a proclamation was made concerning him that he should rank third in the kingdom>> (Daniel 5:29). For Jesus, dressing him in this way was for a very different purpose: <<Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe. They kept coming up to him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' and striking him on the face. Pilate went out again and said to them, 'Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him.' So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, 'Here is the man!' When the chief priests and the police saw him, they shouted, 'Crucify him! Crucify him!' Pilate said to them, 'Take him yourselves and crucify him; I find no case against him.' The Jews answered him, 'We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God'>> (John 19:1-7).

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.'

Genesis 41:44

Without your consent no one shall lift up hand or foot in all the land of Egypt. It was not unknown for Semites to attain high positions in the Egyptian government. For example, during the first half of the 2nd Millennium BC, an Asiatic (refer to the comment made on 37:28) named Hur became superintendent of the Royal Seal, i.e. chancellor, of Egypt. Hur is well known from numerous scarab-seals of the 17th and 16th Centuries BC.

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.

Genesis 41:45

Pharaoh gave Joseph the name Zaphenath-paneah. The provision of an Egyptian name and a wife completes the process by which Pharaoh fully integrates Joseph into his royal court.

Jewish legends say each letter of Joseph's Egyptian name means something. Linking them all together, the name is 'Seer - redeemer - prophet - supporter - interpreter of dreams - clever - discreet - wise.' More likely the name means 'God Speaks and He Lives', referring to God's word coming through Joseph, his own preservation, and the way he has preserved the country.

Joseph's marriage to Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, would have completed his assimilation into Egypt. By marrying into a prominent priestly family, Joseph would gain additional acceptance.

Jewish legends say Asenath was really the daughter of Dinah and Shechem, resulting from the rape of Dinah (34:2), who many years earlier had been abandoned at the border of Egypt and then adopted into the family of an Egyptian priest. This is best treated as folklore rather than a fact!

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. 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 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.

Genesis 41:46-49

Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh king of Egypt. The narrator provides an important milestone in the timeline of Joseph's life. He had now been in Egypt approximately 13 years.

When a Levite became thirty years old he was considered old enough to serve in the tabernacle or temple: to be of fighting age and Joseph's descendants would be enumerated as such: <<Take a census of the Kohathites separate from the other Levites, by their clans and their ancestral houses, from thirty years old up to fifty years old, all who qualify to do work relating to the tent of meeting>> (Numbers 4:2-3). It was also the age at which the first two Israeli kings came to the throne: <<Saul was thirty years old when he became king, and he reigned over Israel forty- two years>> (1 Samuel 13:1 NIV), and: <<David was thirty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned for forty years>> (2 Samuel 5:4).

During the seven plenteous years the earth produced abundantly. God had indicated this in the dreams to Pharaoh through the fat cows and ears of wheat.

This would not have been unusual though since the fertile soil and water supplied by the Nile enabled ancient civilisations in Egypt to form and flourish. Before being dammed the Nile would overflow every year leaving deposits of black, nutrient rich soil well beyond its banks.

He gathered up all the food of the seven years when there was plenty in the land of Egypt, and stored up food in the cities. Joseph implemented his plan to store sufficient food for the years of famine that he knew lay ahead. The food was stored nearest to the major populations in order to make its distribution easier.

So Joseph stored up grain in such abundance – like the sand of the sea – that he stopped measuring it; it was beyond measure. It seems that the harvest was even more bountiful than usual. It was customary for Pharaoh to collect 10% of the crop as a tax. Verse 34 refers to Joseph's recommendation to take one fifth or 20% so he, in fact, doubled taxation in order to provide for the people.

The text here is also a reminder of the promise of God to create the Hebrew nation: <<I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies>> (Genesis 22:17).

⁵⁰ Before the years of famine came, Joseph had two sons, whom Asenath daughter of Potiphara, priest of On, bore to him. ⁵¹ Joseph named the firstborn Manasseh, 'For', he said, 'God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house.' ⁵² The second he named Ephraim, 'For God has made me fruitful in the land of my misfortunes.'

Genesis 41:50-52

The names of the two boys reveal that Joseph has not entirely forgotten the past. While the name Manasseh, which has the sense of 'forget' or 'forgetfulness,' reflects how things have moved on for Joseph, it ironically also recalls his father's house. The name Ephraim, which means 'twice fruitful' or 'fruitfulness,' recalls the recurring theme of being fruitful; refer to the comment made on 1:28.

God has made me fruitful in the land of my misfortunes. Despite all of his misfortunes, Joseph is grateful to God for he recognises the providential care that has brought him to the position he is now in.

⁵³ The seven years of 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, 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.

Genesis 41:53-57

As predicted in Pharaoh’s dreams, the seven years of plenty are followed by a famine that extends well beyond the borders of Egypt. Joseph’s preparations, however, ensure that food is available for the Egyptians and all the world, i.e. at least the entire eastern Mediterranean region; as confirmed by the comment made on 6:17.

Moreover, all the world came to Joseph in Egypt to buy grain. This was more than a way of making Egypt wealthier. The people in Canaan, including Joseph’s family, also suffered from this famine: <<*Now there came a famine throughout Egypt and Canaan, and great suffering, and our ancestors could find no food*>> (Acts 7:11). However, God made wise though unexpected provision for them by sending Joseph ahead of the family. Had he not there would have been no Hebrew nation and no Messiah to come from them!

Paul later wrote: <<*We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose*>> (Romans 8:28). Joseph did not have Romans 8:28 on paper, but he had it in his heart. A Christian today may very well have it on paper, but not in the heart.