

Genesis Bible Study 23

The Last Will be First

taken from

Salvation for the Social Order: For Those Who Haven't Read the Bible and for Those Who Think Religion is Merely a Private Matter

by Philip E. Friesen

Reading: Genesis 40-41

Principal Question: Is life a matter of chance, or is there a Divine purpose for Joseph?

Main Point: God is leading Joseph.

Notes

This is the kind of story one would be proud to tell about one's own family. It shows how intelligent and lucky a famous ancestor was. It is very different from the stories about Jacob. One reason for believing that the patriarchal stories are actual history is that people do not invent bad stories about their ancestors to tell their children. When the bad is included with the good in a family story, the story is much more believable. Another reason to trust the account of Genesis about this family is in the way spiritual experiences are reported. People of all times in different cultures have reported spiritual experiences such as we have here. The earlier, fantastic, mythical stories of gods and goddesses are quite different from the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. These men walk and talk like real people, and resemble quite closely the culture of the Middle East as we know it between three and four thousand years ago.

The following story is fantastic in how well it turns out in a most unlikely way, yet is consistent with the kind of person we already know Joseph to be. I have heard people say this story could never have happened, because the justice of it is simply too perfect, that life never occurs like this. Read the story and see what you think about it.

Genesis 40-41 Condensed in Simple English

After these events, King Pharaoh became angry with his cupbearer and baker, and put them in prison where Joseph was. One night both men had a dream that upset them, and Joseph asked them why they appeared so depressed. They said, "We each dreamed a dream, and no one here is able to interpret it.

Joseph replied, "Don't interpretations belong to God? Tell me the dreams."

So the cupbearer began, "I dreamed I saw a vine with three branches that first produced blossoms, and then ripe fruit. I was holding Pharaoh's cup; so I squeezed the grapes into the cup, and gave the cup to Pharaoh."

"The three branches are three days," Joseph said. "In three days Pharaoh will restore you to your job. When this happens, please mention me to Pharaoh, and get me out of prison. I was kidnapped from the Hebrews, and have done nothing wrong to be put in prison."

When the chief baker heard the interpretation, he also told his dream, and said, "I dreamed there were three baskets of white bread on my head with good things for

Pharaoh, and the birds were eating the bread out of the basket.”

“The three baskets are three days,” Joseph said. “In three days Pharaoh will hang you on a tree, and the birds will eat your body.”

The third day was Pharaoh’s birthday, and he did exactly as Joseph had said. The chief cupbearer was given his old position, and the chief baker was hung on a tree. Yet the cupbearer completely forgot about Joseph.

Now two years later, Pharaoh dreamed a dream. In his dream seven, fat, sleek cows came up and grazed on the grass by the river. Then seven, gaunt, skinny cows came and ate the fat cows, and Pharaoh awoke. Pharaoh went back to sleep and again he dreamed that seven, plump, good ears of grain grew on one stalk. After that seven, thin, burnt ears of grain grew on the stalk, and they ate the good ears of grain.

When Pharaoh woke up, he called all the magicians and wise men of Egypt to interpret his dream, but no one could help him. Then the cupbearer said, “Today I remember my faults. When I was in prison, both the chief baker and I each dreamed a dream, and a Hebrew youth in the prison interpreted each of our dreams. Everything happened to us exactly as he said.”

Pharaoh hurriedly called for Joseph, and as soon as Joseph had shaved and changed clothes, he was brought to Pharaoh. After hearing Pharaoh’s dream Joseph said, “God has showed Pharaoh his plan. There will be seven years of good harvest in Egypt, but after that, famine will ravage the land for another seven years. The good years will be completely forgotten in that time of severe famine. The dream came twice because it will surely happen, and happen quickly. Therefore, let Pharaoh appoint a wise administrator to collect a fifth of the produce during the good years to store up for the time of famine; so the land does not perish. ”

Pharaoh was pleased with Joseph’s proposal and said, “I will make you my administrator. You will be second in command to me, and all Egypt will obey you.” Then Pharaoh took off his ring and put it on Joseph’s hand, dressed Joseph in royal attire, assigned his second chariot for Joseph’s personal use, and made him second in command. Pharaoh gave Joseph a wife, Asenath, the daughter of Potiphara priest of On, and Joseph soon had two sons by her, whom he named Manasseh¹ and Ephraim².

Joseph was 30 years old when he was made the king’s administrator. During the next seven years Joseph gathered grain as much as the sand on the sea. It was so much that they stopped measuring. It could not be measured.

When the seven good years were finished and the bad time began, the people became hungry and asked Pharaoh for food. Pharaoh put Joseph in charge of sales and distribution, both domestic and foreign, since the famine was widespread over the whole area.

¹ And Joseph named the first-born Manasseh, "For," he said, "God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household."

² And he named the second Ephraim, "For," he said, "God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction."

Discussion

1. Do you think this story could have happened in real life, or is it only the kind of thing one reads in fiction?
2. Have you ever had a dream that impressed you deeply?
3. Would you mind sharing your dream and what it meant to you?
4. Do you think dream interpretation is valid, or just a form of superstition?
5. Do you agree with Joseph's interpretation of why he has become successful (Genesis 40:8; Genesis 41:16; Genesis 41:51-52)?
6. Do you believe that God is directing your life? Is it:
 - Something you do believe?
 - Something you would like to believe?
 - A silly or superstitious idea?
 - Something that frightens you to think about?
 - Other?

Content Questions for English Comprehension

7. Name each person in the story and describe his role.
8. Tell the content of the cupbearer's dream.
9. Tell the content of the baker's dream.
10. Tell the content of Pharaoh's dream.
11. How does Joseph explain his success (note the meaning of his son's names in the footnotes above)?