

Genesis Chapter 40

Genesis 40:1 "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."

“Butler” is an unfortunate translation since the phrase literally means “cupbearer of the king.”

Egyptian inscriptions include various titles for those involved in serving wine and beer to the Pharaoh.

“King of Egypt”: To be identified as Senusert II (ca. 1894-1878 B.C).

Genesis 40:2 "And Pharaoh was wroth against two [of] his officers, against the chief of the butlers, and against the chief of the bakers."

“The chief of the butlers ... chief of the bakers”:

Both these occupations and ranks in Pharaoh’s court are attested in existing within ancient Egyptian documents.

The cupbearer gave him his drinks.

The baker cooked his bread.

Both had to be trustworthy and beyond the influence of the monarch’s enemies.

Verses 3-4

Captain of the guard” (see note on 37:36).

If this was Potiphar, the captain of the guard, then Joseph’s former master directed him to attend to the two royal servants remanded into his custody until sentence was past.

This prison was also called “the house of the captain of the guard” (verse 3), “his lord’s house” (verse 7), and “dungeon” (40:15; 41:14), unless Joseph had been moved to another penal facility.

Genesis 40:3 "And he put them in ward in the house of the captain of the guard, into the prison, the place where Joseph [was] bound."

“And he put them in ward in the house of the captain of the guard”:

Who is generally thought to be Potiphar, since this was the office he was in (Genesis 39:1).

"Into the prison, the place where Joseph was bound":

That is, where he had been bound, and where he was still a prisoner, though not fettered and in that close confinement he had been in.

Then the captain "charged Joseph with them," he gave Joseph control over administrative affairs in the prison, not merely over high-ranking prisoners (41:12).

Genesis 40:4 "And the captain of the guard charged Joseph with them, and he served them: and they continued a season in ward."

"And the captain of the guard charged Joseph with them":

Committed them to his care and custody, he being very probably recommended to him by the keeper of the prison for his prudence and fidelity.

And if it was Potiphar, he knew his character full well, and might be now reconciled unto him, as having had a more full and clear account of the affair between him and his wife from the keeper of the prison.

Therefore, though he might not think fit for his own and his wife's reputation to remove him from prison as yet nevertheless might be inclined to do him what service he could.

As well as honor, as this was, to have two such state prisoners committed to his care.

Some render it, "he committed Joseph with them"; to be with them, as Jarchi interprets it.

They were put together, not merely for the sake of company, but that Joseph might wait upon them, which might be beneficial as well as creditable, as it follows.

"And he served them":

He ministered unto them, and brought them everything they wanted.

"And they continued a season in ward":

Or "days"; some certain days, many days, a year, as Jarchi and Ben Gersom interpret it, and which is sometimes the use of the word.

The story of the butler and baker is told, partly to show the divine faculty of interpreting dreams Joseph was possessed of; and partly to observe the remarkable steps in Providence, though secret, towards his advancement in Pharaoh's court.

In this particular area, during this particular time, the Pharaoh was absolute ruler.

If for any reason at all you displeased the Pharaoh, he would throw you into prison; just because he wanted to.

We are not told what crime they had committed, but we can assume that it had to do with the preparation of the food, since they were the butler and the baker.

God put them in Joseph's care for a purpose.

Genesis 40:5 "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."

The two imprisoned court officials had dreams that perplexed them (verses 5-7).

“Dream”:

Oneiromancy, the science or practice of interpreting dreams, flourished in ancient Egypt because dreams were thought to determine the future.

Both Egypt and Babylon developed a professional class of dream interpreters.

(Deut. 13:1-5), shows that such dream interpreters were part of ancient false religion and to be avoided by God’s people.

By some 500 years later, a detailed manual of dream interpretation had been compiled.

Unlike Joseph, neither cupbearer nor baker understood the significance of their dreams (see verses 37:5-11).

Genesis 40:6 "And Joseph came in unto them in the morning, and looked upon them, and, behold, they [were] sad."

"And Joseph came in unto them in the morning":

For though Joseph and they were in the same prison, yet not in the same ward.

Aben Ezra thinks that Joseph lodged in the dungeon in the night (Genesis 40:15); and was let out in the morning to wait on these prisoners.

But the great interest he had in the keeper of the prison, and the favor shown him by the captain of the guard, in putting such prisoners under his care, will easily make one conclude, that Joseph now had a better lodging than that.

Though it had been his case, he was now provided with a better apartment in the prison.

And when he arose in the morning, like a careful and faithful servant, he came to the ward where the prisoners under his care were, to see that they were safe, and what they wanted.

"And looked upon them, and, behold, they were sad":

They looked sorrowful, dejected, and uneasy.

Genesis 40:7 "And he asked Pharaoh's officers that [were] with him in the ward of his lord's house, saying, Wherefore look ye [so] sadly today?"

"And he asked Pharaoh's officers that were with him":

The chief butler and baker that were committed to his care, and with whom he now was.

"In the ward of the lord's house":

This seems to confirm what is before observed, that the captain of the guard that charged Joseph with them was Potiphar his master.

Though indeed the keeper of the prison that was under Potiphar, the captain of the guard, might be called Joseph's lord or master, but the house could not with so much propriety be called his.

"Saying, wherefore look ye so sadly today?"

As they were officers, who had been in lucrative places, they lived well and merrily, and expected very probably they should be released in a short time, nothing appearing against them.

But now there was a strange alteration in them, which was very visible to Joseph, and for which he expresses a concern, being of a kind, tender, and benevolent disposition, as the question he puts to them shows.

Genesis 40:8 "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."

Joseph's immediate response was "do not interpretations belong to God?"

The immediate response of his mind (in 39:9; 41:16, 51-52; 45:8).

Joseph was careful to give credit to his LORD (41:16).

Daniel, the only other Hebrew whom God allowed to accurately interpret revelatory dreams, was just as careful to do so (Dan. 2:28).

Significantly, God chose both men to play an important role for Israel while serving pagan monarchs and stepping forwards at the critical moment to interpret their dreams and them to reveal their futures.

This situation was not unusual.

These two men had displeased the Pharaoh.

They were waiting for him to have a change of heart, so they could be released.

God will use unbelievers to accomplish His goals.

These two men were apparently Egyptians.

God also, speaks in dreams.

These two men were troubled because they did not know what their dreams meant.

Interpretation of dreams is a gift from God.

Joseph being a man of God had this special gift.

He did not brag that he had the gift; he gives God the credit, and then he asked them to tell him the dreams.

Verses 9-13

“The chief cupbearer”.

Consistent with his duty as the cupbearer to the king, he dreamed of a drink that had been prepared for Pharaoh.

It was a sign that he would be released and returned to his position (verse 13).

Genesis 40:9 "And the chief butler told his dream to Joseph, and said to him, In my dream, behold, a vine [was] before me;"

"And the chief butler told his dream to Joseph":

He listened to what Joseph said, and paid a regard to it, and began to think he might be able to interpret his dream, and therefore was forward, and the first to tell him it at once.

Whereas the chief baker did not seem disposed to do it, until he observed the good interpretation given of the butler's dream (Genesis 40:16).

"And said unto him, in my dream, behold, a vine was before me":

It appeared to him in his dream, as if a vine sprung up at once, and stood before him; which was very suitable to his office as a butler, wine being the fruit of the vine, which he provided for the king his master, and presented to him at table.

Genesis 40:10 "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:"

"And in the vine were three branches":

Which shot out from the root or body of it.

"And it was as though it budded":

The branches seemed to sprout out.

"And her blossoms shot forth":

It knotted, and the flowers of the vine appeared, which blowing off, the tender grapes were seen.

"And the clusters thereof brought forth ripe grapes":

All which is agreeably to the order nature observes, from the first putting forth of the vine, to its producing ripe fruit.

And which in this dream immediately followed one another, as it seemed according to the representation of things to the mind of the butler, and which he perfectly remembered, it having made a strong impression upon him.

Genesis 40:11 "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."

"And Pharaoh's cup was in his hand":

So it seemed to him in his dream, as it often had been when in his office.

"And I took the grapes":

From off the vine that was before him.

"And pressed them into Pharaoh's cup":

Which some think was the custom of those times, to take a bunch of grapes and squeeze them into a cup, especially when they would make trial of what sort of wine they would produce.

For it can hardly be thought that this was usually done, or that it was customary to drink such new wine.

But it is more probable that the grapes were first pressed into another vessel, and so made wine of, and then poured into Pharaoh's cup, or mixed in it; though this circumstance is omitted.

Indeed, relates of the Egyptian priests, that wine pressed out of the vine is given them.

"And I gave the cup into Pharaoh's hand":

As he had used to do.

Genesis 40:12 "And Joseph said unto him, This [is] the interpretation of it: The three branches [are] three days:"

"And Joseph said unto him, this is the interpretation of it":

Of the dream.

"The three branches are three days":

Signify three days, or, as Jarchi expresses it, are a sign of three days; which Joseph could know only by divine revelation.

For there is no more likeness between branches and days, than between them and months or years, and bid as fair to signify one as the other, if the interpretation depended on similarity, or bare conjecture.

Genesis 40:13 "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."

"Yet within three days shall Pharaoh lift up thine head":

The Targum of Jonathan adds, with glory; and the sense is, either that Pharaoh would raise him up from the low estate in which he now was, to the same exalted station in which he had been in with Pharaoh previously.

Or that he would reckon and number him among his servants, when he should take a catalogue of them, or make a new list, so Jarchi and Aben Ezra; and this phrase is used of taking the sum of persons, or the number of them, and is so rendered (Exodus 30:12).

The allusion is thought to be to a custom that was used by great personages, to have the names of their servants called over on a certain day, as Pharaoh perhaps used to do on his birthday (see Genesis 40:20).

When they struck out of the list or put into it whom they pleased, and pardoned or punished such as had offended.

And this sense is the rather inclined to, because Pharaoh is said to lift up the head of both the butler and the baker (Genesis 40:20).

Yet it may be observed, that the phrases used by Joseph concerning them differ; for of the baker he says, "Pharaoh shall lift up thy head from off thee" (Genesis 40:19); wherefore, though the heads of them both were lift up, yet in a different sense.

The one was lifted up to the gallows, and the other to his former dignity, as follows.

"And restore thee unto thy place":

To his office in ministering: to Pharaoh as his cup bearer.

"And thou shalt deliver Pharaoh's cup into his hand, after the former manner when thou wast his butler".

Which was signified in the dream, by squeezing the grapes into Pharaoh's cup he had in his hand, and gave unto him.

This was a pleasure for Joseph to interpret this dream.

It was good news.

The budding of plants and flowers, throughout the Bible, means new life.

Grapes and grape juice are symbolic of the Holy Spirit.

Joseph was learned in the things of God.

This gift, as we said before, comes from God alone.

Verses 14-15

“Show kindness”:

A poignant appeal to the cupbearer, whose future was secure, to speak a word for Joseph's freedom, because he knew cupbearers had the ear of kings.

The cupbearer quickly forgot Joseph (verse 23), until his memory was prompted just at the right moment two years later (41:1, 9).

Genesis 40:14 "But think on me when it shall be well with thee, and show kindness, I pray thee, unto me, and make mention of me unto Pharaoh, and bring me out of this house:"

“Show kindness”:

This is the same term used by Abraham (in 20:13), and indicates a demonstration of faithfulness based upon a particular relationship.

In this case, Joseph had interpreted a dream of the chief butler.

It is the same word used of God’s faithfulness shown to Joseph (in 39:21), when he was in prison and God changed the heart of the keeper of the prison (see Daniel in Dan. 1:9).

Genesis 40:15 "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."

"For indeed I was stolen away out of the land of the Hebrews":

Not the whole land of Canaan, so called, either from the Hebrews sojourning in it, or from its being given unto them by God.

Giving this designation to the land of Canaan indicates that Joseph understood the land promise of the Abrahamic Covenant.

Neither of which could be a reason why Joseph, when talking with an Egyptian, should give it this name, and which, it must be supposed, was known to him; but that part of the land of Canaan where the Hebrews had sojourned for three generations, where Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had lived, even at or near Hebron.

And being persons of great note, and having done great exploits, their names were well known, and the country where they lived, and particularly among the Egyptians.

"And here also have I done nothing that they should put me into the dungeon":

Since he had been in the land of Egypt, he had not been guilty of any criminal action wherefore he should be put into a prison, and especially into a dungeon, which was a dark and filthy place that was underground, as dungeons usually were, and into which Joseph was put into when he was first in his confinement.

Though since taken out of it, he makes no mention of the wickedness of his mistress, and of her false accusation of him, nor of the injustice of his master in putting him into prison without hearing him.

Only asserts his own innocence, which was necessary to recommend himself to the butler, that he might not think he was some loose fellow that was committed to prison for some capital crime, and so it would have, been a disgrace to him to have spoken for him.

Joseph was just telling him to put in a good word for him with the Pharaoh.

The only one who could go over Potiphar's head and release Joseph, would be the Pharaoh.

Joseph explained to him that he was being punished for something he did not do.

Here again, we have a type and shadow of Jesus.

Jesus was punished for our sins, not His own.

Joseph had no sin either.

Jesus was betrayed and sold by His brethren.

Joseph was betrayed and sold by his brethren.

Genesis 40:16 "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:"

"When the chief baker saw that the interpretation was good":

The chief baker, noting some similarity in the dreams, was encouraged to request interpretation of his dream.

Meaning not that it was right and just, though it was; but that it was agreeable and pleasing, and portended good in the event.

Therefore, hoped a like interpretation would be given of his dream, and this encouraged him to tell it, which perhaps otherwise he would not have done.

"He said unto Joseph, I also was in a dream":

Or had a dream, and in it things were represented to his mind as follows:

"And, behold, I had three white baskets on my head": Which were made of wicker, of rods that had the bark pulled off, and so were white; or which had holes in them.

Baskets wrought with holes, after the manner of network; though some think this denotes not the color or form of the basket, but of the bread in them.

And interpret the words, baskets of white bread, as Saadiah Gaon, and so the Targum of Jonathan, baskets of most pure bread, and the Targum of Jerusalem, baskets of hot bread; this dream was very agreeable to his office and business as a baker.

Genesis 40:17 "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."

"And in the uppermost basket there was of all manner of bakemeats for Pharaoh":

All sorts of pastry, as tarts, pies, etc.

Josephus says, two of the baskets were full of bread, and the third had various sorts of food, such as is usual, and prepared for kings.

"And the birds did eat them out of the basket upon my head":

All the three baskets were upon his head, but this seems to be the uppermost, which the birds could more easily come at; though if the baskets were full of holes, they might peck through the hole to get the bread with their bills.

The baker did not believe Joseph could interpret dreams.

He only told his dream, because of the good interpretation of the butler's dream.

Sometimes, we already know the dream is bad, but we want someone to reassure us that it is not.

Genesis 40:18 "And Joseph answered and said, This [is] the interpretation thereof: The three baskets [are] three days:"

"And Joseph answered and said":

Immediately, directly, without any further thought and meditation, being divinely instructed.

"This is the interpretation thereof":

Of the above dream.

"The three baskets are three days":

Signifying three days.

Genesis 40:19 "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."

When it is said that Pharaoh "lifted up the head of the chief butler and of the chief baker," Joseph used a key expression, capable of being interpreted in opposite ways, to describe first the cupbearer's pardon and restoration to honor (2 Kings 25:27), then the beheading or hanging of the baker (verse 19).

This was surely not what the baker wanted to hear.

One thing that stands out, to me in this, a prophet of God, must tell the truth at all times.

Sometimes the news is bad, but he must give it exactly as God gives it to him.

Genesis 40:20 "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."

"And it came to pass the third day, which was Pharaoh's birthday":

The third day from the time the dreams were told, and the interpretation of them given, was the birthday of Pharaoh.

"That he made a feast unto all his servants":

His ministers of state, his courtiers, and all in his palace.

"And he lifted up the head of his chief butler and of his chief baker, among his servants":

That is, among his servants, when their names were called over or at this festival, these two were taken notice of, as being charged with crimes, and their cases were looked into and examined, and their heads were lifted up in a different sense.

They were both lifted out of prison, but the one was lifted up to his former post and place in Pharaoh's court, and the other was lifted up to a gallows or gibbet, as follows.

Though perhaps this lifting of them both may only signify the trial of them, when they were set on high to be seen by the judge and all the court (see 1 Kings 21:9).

Genesis 40:21 "And he restored the chief butler unto his butlership again; and he gave the cup into Pharaoh's hand:"

"And he restored the chief butler unto his butlership again":

Put him into the same office he was in before.

"And he gave the cup into Pharaoh's hand":

Ministered to him in his office the same day, according to his dream and the interpretation of it.

The Targum of Jonathan adds this as a reason of his being restored, "because he found that he was not in that counsel," in which it was consulted to poison Pharaoh (see Gen. 40:1).

Genesis 40:22 "But he hanged the chief baker: as Joseph had interpreted to them."

"But he hanged the chief baker":

That is, he ordered him to be hanged; because, as the same Targum says, he consulted to kill him (Pharaoh).

"As Joseph had interpreted to them":

The events as to both answered to the interpretation Joseph had given of their several dreams.

The test of a true prophet is if things they prophesy come true.

Genesis 40:23 "Yet did not the chief butler remember Joseph, but forgot him."

"Yet did not the chief butler remember Joseph":

To speak of him to Pharaoh, neither on that day in which he was restored, nor for a long time after, even for the space of two years, as seems from the following chapter.

"But forgot him; never more thought of him":

Of the favor he had done him in interpreting his dream.

Of the request he made to him, and of the promise which he had probably given him.

Which was an instance of great ingratitude, and is frequently the case and character of courtiers, who being in high places themselves, neglect others, their petitions to them, and their own promises to do all they can for them.

When we are in trouble, we promise anything to get out, but once out, it is easy to forget.

That was just what this butler did.

His problem had been solved, so he forgot Joseph.

Genesis Chapter 40 Questions

1. What two men had offended the king of Egypt?
2. What did he do to them?
3. Who was put over them?
4. One night they both had a_____?
5. When Joseph saw them, they were _____?
6. What question did Joseph ask them?

7. Does God ever use unbelievers to accomplish his goals?
8. Interpretations of dreams are what?
9. What did the Butler dream?
10. What did his dream mean?
11. What does the budding of plants mean?
12. How do people interpret dreams?
13. What favor did Joseph ask the butler?
14. How did Joseph tell him he came to Egypt?
15. Who had authority over Potiphar?
16. Compare Joseph to Jesus in this? Two ways.
17. Why did the baker want Joseph to interpret his dream?
18. What was the interpretation of the baker's dream?
19. What message does this give us?
20. What is the test of a true prophet?
21. When the butler was restored, what did he do?