

Genesis 41

'Pharaoh's Dreams'

Introduction ...

In Evensong's readings from Genesis, we've jumped into the story of Joseph ... he's been sold by his brothers into slavery, he's been wrongly imprisoned. In prison, he's interpreted two dreams – those of Pharaoh's servants: the cupbearer and the baker. Joseph's interpretation is correct ... but he remains in prison – and we come to tonight's passage.

Here are some comments from **Gerald West (Genesis BRF 2006)**

Time passes. In one short narrative sentence, two full years pass. The Hebrew phrase 'and at the end of two years of days' (v.1) hints at the relentless and tedious passing of time. But once again the passage of time is interrupted by dreams. Again there are two dreams. The reader again wonders whether, this time, things will work out for Joseph.

The reader (like Joseph) is required to wait, however. Pharaoh's dreams, like Joseph's and those of the cupbearer and baker, draw on the ordinary images of an agricultural society. In the case of Pharaoh's dreams, though, these images become grotesquely distorted, with the gaunt cattle devouring the sleek, and the thin ears of corn consuming the healthy. Indeed, so horrible is the image that Pharaoh is relieved to wake and find it a dream (v.7). In the Hebrew text, the reader is invited to experience the dreams directly as Pharaoh does, through the repeated use of the phrase 'and see/behold.' Verse 2 begins 'And see/behold, from the Nile ...' as do verses 3, 5 and 6. We then experience, with Pharaoh, the relief of waking (v7): 'And see/behold, it was a dream!'

Pharaoh's usual resources, his magicians and wise men, are unable to interpret these disturbing dreams, and their failure sets the stage for Joseph.

Joseph before Pharaoh ...

Joseph has no direct access to Pharaoh, of course, and so must rely on the kindness of others (40:14) The cupbearer finally delivers: at last he 'remembers' (compare 40:14 with 41:9). He recounts his experience in prison with Joseph, but leaves out an important detail, namely the identity of the one to whom interpretations belong (40:8)

Now the pace picks up. Time accelerates as Joseph is summoned, has to shave (according to Egyptian custom) and changes his clothes. In the rush, the attentive reader should not neglect to notice that Joseph is once again clothed in the clothing of favour. His father clothed him, Potiphar clothed him, and now Pharaoh (or perhaps the captain of the guard) clothes him (v.14) How long will he wear these clothes, given that he did not wear the others for any length of time?

Joseph immediately makes it clear to Pharaoh that he is not simply another expert. Once again he **PTO**

bears testimony to God – in the palace of the Egyptian Pharaoh. Joseph’s phrasing is careful, as it should be, showing his awareness of where he is. ‘Elohim/God’ he says, ‘will answer Pharaoh with peace’ (v 16). This is ambiguous, implying perhaps that the interpretation will be favourable to Pharaoh, or, more likely (from Joseph’s perspective) that God will provide an accurate interpretation and so bring Pharaoh’s troubled mind to peace. One has to be careful how one talks to the powerful, and Joseph shows that his years as a servant have taught him how to talk to power.

Conclusion ...

It’s important, I think to reflect on this passage in the light of what is going on around us.

In Joseph’s time, there were food shortages ... the same is true in our day. Not as acutely for us ... but just as acutely in other areas of the world.

In Joseph’s time – there were some nations with plenty – but who were going to face tough times in the future ... that rings true also in 2022.

What was needed in Joseph’s time?

Someone who could speak the truth to power

Someone in power who would listen – who was prepared to be advised

Someone who was wise and discerned to set policy and procedures ... who was backed by power

These too are needed in our time – let’s pray and continue to pray that they will happen:

Someone who could speak the truth to power

Someone in power who would listen – who was prepared to be advised

Someone who was wise and discerned to set policy and procedures ... who was backed by power

Amen.