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AN EXEGETICAL LOOK AT GENESIS 39: POTIPHAR'S WIFE AND JOSEPH

JOSEPH PETRAMALO

Genesis 39¹: Potiphar's Wife and Joseph

(1) When Joseph was taken down to Egypt, a certain Egyptain, Potiphar, a courtier of Pharaoh and his chief steward, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him there. (2) The LORD was with Joseph, and he was a successful man; and he stayed in the house of his Egyptian master. (3) And when his master saw that the LORD was with him that the LORD lent success to everything he undertook, (4) he took a liking to Joseph. He made him his personal attendant and put him in charge of his household, placing in his hands all that he owned. (5) And from the time that the Egyptian put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the LORD blessed his house for Joseph's sake, so that the blessing of the LORD was upon everything that he owned, in the house and outside. (6) He left all that he had in Joseph's hands and, with him there, he paid attention to nothing save the food that he ate. Now Joseph was well built and handsome. (7) After a time, his master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph and said, "Lie with me." (8) But he refused. He said to his master's wife, "Look, with me here, my master gives no thought to anything in this house, and all that he owns he has placed in my hands. (9) He wields no more authority in this house than I, and he has withheld nothing from me except yourself, since you are his wife. How then could I do this most wicked thing, and sin before God?" (10) And much as she coaxed Joseph day after day, he did not yield to her request to lie beside her, to be with her. (11) One such day, he came into the house to do his work. None of the household being there inside, (12) she caught hold of him by his coat and said, "Lie with me!" But he left his coat in her hand and got away and fled outside. (13) When she saw that he had left his coat in her hand and

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1. The translation used is W. Gunther Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary Jewish Publication Society* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981).

had fled outside, (14) she called out to her servants and said to them, "Look, he had to bring us a Hebrew to mock us! This one came to lie with me; but I screamed loud. (15) And when he heard me screaming at the top of my voice, he left his coat with me and got away and fled outside." (16) She kept his coat beside her, until his master came home. (17) Then she told him the same story, saying, "The Hebrew slave whom you brought into our house came to me to mock me; (18) but when I screamed at the top of my voice, he left his coat with me and fled outside." (19) When his master heard the story that his wife told him, namely, "Thus and so your slave did to me," he was furious. (20) So Joseph's master had him put in prison, where the king's prisoners were confined. But even while he was there in prison, (21) the LORD was with Joseph: He extended kindness to him and disposed the chief jailer favorably toward him. (22) The chief jailer put in Joseph's charge all the prisoners who were in that prison, and he was the one to carry out everything that was done there. (23) The chief jailer did not supervise anything that was in Joseph's charge, because the LORD was with him, and whatever he did the LORD made successful.

Historical Background

The historical setting for this chapter in Genesis has been a difficult one for scholars to pinpoint. In actuality, it has not been done. We know from the text that it is during the time when Israel is still a nomadic tribe. It falls a few centuries after Abraham has come out of Mesopotamia that Jacob, Joseph's father, is a nomad living with his family in tents. Because of the reference to the herding of the animals in chapter 37, it is obvious that Jacob and his sons were nomadic pastoralists. This shows a very early period for the dating of this story. The source that can offer the most information is Egypt.

Many scholars have found evidence from the text supporting the theory that Joseph's time in Egypt must have come during the Hyksos period. This is the theory which is best supported and most widely accepted. The first clue we find is the use of horses. Traditionally it was assumed that horses were not used in Egypt until the coming of the Hyksos. Thus, it can be presumed that Joseph enters Egypt during the Hyksos dynasty. However, recent textual and archaeological data suggests that in fact horses existed in Egypt much earlier. A horse skeleton has been found at Gaza dating to around 2500 B.C.E. Another historical clue is that during Joseph's stay in Egypt the pharaoh was living in the Delta Valley. During the Hyksos dynasty, the capital was at Avaris, which was in the northeast corner of the Delta. The third factor that points to this time period is the comment in Exodus 1:8 that the pharaoh "knew not Joseph." This seems odd, considering the fact that Joseph would have been known throughout Egypt because of his later position of authority. It can be assumed that when the Hyksos dynasty was overthrown a native

Egyptian came to rule again. Because of the hate and animosity towards this dynasty, the Egyptians attempted to erase the Hyksos period from their historical records. This would have also been one of the most likely times for Joseph (a foreigner) to have risen to power.

There are also many arguments against this dating. Each of these arguments has been questioned and there is evidence that stands against them, but it seems likely that the Hyksos period was the backdrop for the story of Joseph in Egypt. I will use this as the historical context for my discussion on this chapter. This would put our chapter around 2000–1800 B.C.E.

Literary Context

This is an important chapter for the political and theological developments that take place. It is in Egypt that Israel becomes a powerful nation. When they arrive, they are a small nomadic people. But when they leave, they are a great nation. It is during this time that God renews his covenants with his people and sends Moses to deliver them. The next few chapters following 39 show this development. We find an interesting situation in the literary construction of these later chapters of Genesis.

It seems that chapter 39 begins where chapter 37 left off. Thus, chapter 38 is an interpolation into the text, probably made by some redactor. However, upon closer inspection, it seems that there is a direct correlation between chapters 38 and 39 in regards to the topic of sexuality. In chapter 38 we find the story of Judah and Tamar. Here Judah sins by committing fornication with her. He gives in to his physical desires and in so doing loses his birthright. In contrast, Joseph is strong by resisting the advances of Potiphar's wife. He states that to lie with her would be "a sin against God" (Gen 39:9). This was the major theme of Genesis 39, according to the patristic commentaries. I will look at this idea further when discussing the theological ramifications of these verses. It seems clear that the placement of these two chapters shows a definite relationship.

But we also find another literary grouping. Genesis 39–41 seems to be a literary unit of its own. Here we find the story of Joseph in Egypt and his rise to power. There is no mention of his family or Canaan in any of the verses within this pericope. We see that one of the other themes is prospering in the empire. He prospers as chief in Potiphar's house, with his dreams in prison, and also with pharaoh. The text implies that because Joseph relies on the Lord in each circumstance, he is successful and the Lord blesses him in each situation. Thus, it is difficult to pinpoint this story within one literary unit. It seems to be part of three separate ones. Possibly the redactor meant it to be this way. Because of its placement, I would argue that it is crucial to its current location within the text. It was put there for a specific reading. The placement within this section gives the contrast between Judah and Joseph,

but in the following chapters, it also shows how Joseph was the one to become great and make Israel great as well.

This passage seems to be fairly comprehensive. It does not contain much historically besides giving us the name Potiphar. However, this name has never been attested historically thus it is useless for historical data. We are never given the name of the pharaoh during Joseph's rise to power. Because of this we must go deeper into the text to find other clues for the historicity of the chapter. I have done a brief job above, but a thorough analysis would require a much larger investigation than is possible here. While the historical data is lacking here and requires more guess work than anything, the theological data is excellent. Because of the layout of the chapters, the emphasis can be seen in the placement of the specific chapters.

Another important part of this text is its authorship. This chapter has been attributed to the J source by scholarship. Our best clue for this is the appearance of Yahweh in vv. 2, 3, 5, 21, and 23. While it is arguable that it was possibly the E source, most would attribute the majority of the chapter to J. We do find a couple of very interesting points that should be considered because of the differences between the J and E reading. In v. 4, the text says that "he served him," in reference to Joseph becoming Potiphar's servant. This appears as a variant of E, but in J, his position is much higher. He is a *mer-per* (superintendent of the house). Thus, there is a stronger emphasis on Joseph's success in the J account. If we are to assume that Genesis, as well as the other four books of the Pentateuch, was written by Moses, then we would apply the authorship to him. However, if we apply the Documentary Hypothesis, then we would place the source with J.

Form

There is not much to look at regarding form in this chapter. However, there are a few small things that I would like to note before moving on to the structure of chapter 39. This specific chapter falls within a narrative account. It is simply a story being told by the author/redactor. The specific category is more difficult to place. It most certainly is a popular history narrative. It sets up a history which would later be important to the Israelites and their origins. We have a number of other historical narratives, similar to this one, in chapter 39. Most of these can be found in the book of Genesis. It also falls under the special narrative grouping of a *waw*-consecutive tense. This is one of two popular narrative tenses that are used in the Hebrew narrative accounts.

It is interesting to note, however, that the success of Joseph is always attributed to the Lord. This is present in parallel formulae. It is mentioned twice in the beginning of the chapter and twice at the end. Both times it is used to make the point to the reader that the Lord is with Joseph and he will prosper, even if he is struggling at the moment. It is used to explain everything

in this chapter. This is often one of the most important aspects of Israelite narrative accounts. The Lord promises Israel that if they keep their covenants with him, he will protect them. The parallel emphasizes the importance of this concept in this story of Genesis 39.

Structure

I will first give a brief outline of the major sections here in the chapter, and then go into more detail with each. I do this to show the narrative structure upon which this chapter was built. The first part of the chapter begins with Joseph going down to Egypt. This comprises the first two verses. The second part is the status of Joseph after he arrives at Potiphar's house, where he quickly advances in rank and experiences much success. This continues from v. 2 until 6. The third part is the temptation of Joseph by Potiphar's wife. This makes up the majority of the chapter from v. 6 until 18. The main focus of the chapter is to show how Joseph overcame the temptation with which he was faced. The fourth part shows the consequences of his refusal.

In v. 1 we are told that he is taken down to Egypt. There he is purchased as a slave by Potiphar. It is interesting that Potiphar is referenced as an Egyptian three different times. It would seem that this is important due to the repetition found in so few verses. This could be one clue that would lend support to the Hyksos theory.² The status of Potiphar and the fact that he was a native Egyptian seems to be the purpose of this repetition. His name gives more support to his native status.³

The second theme begins in v. 2 where it says, "The Lord was with Joseph, and he was a successful man; and he stayed in the house of his Egyptian master." Joseph is not subjected to outside slave labor like most would have been. Because of his skills he is kept inside as a household servant. Because of his continued success in the proceeding few verses, he is given greater responsibility. Eventually he is given authority over everything except the food which Potiphar eats. Here is another interesting narrative intrusion. Why would Potiphar pay so much attention to the food he ate? The text is very specific about this point. Some interpreters have questioned whether or not everything was so prosperous under Joseph that he had nothing else to do but sit around and eat. While this may be a subtle compliment about Joseph's success, it probably has reference to the Egyptian restrictions on food. They would not allow a foreigner to prepare the food. Thus, Joseph was master over all that

2. However, John Skinner, in his Genesis commentary, argues that this is not sufficient evidence to lend support to this theory (*Genesis ICC* [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1930], 457). Thus, it is possible but not particularly arguable on this premise.

3. Skinner, *Genesis*, 457. He explains the Egyptian name as *Pedephre*: "He Whom the Sun-God Gives."

Potiphar had both in the house and out, except for the preparation of food. At this point in the narrative, given his status, Joseph has risen as high as he can.

The third, and most prominent, theme is the temptation of Joseph by Potiphar's wife. Here we have Joseph approached by his master's wife. We are never given her name in this context. However, later tradition names her Zuleika.⁴ We find a number of interesting points here. The first is Joseph's response to her advances. He claims theological reasons for refusing her. In so doing he uses the name Elohim. This is different from his previous references to "Yahweh." He uses the term because she is not a Hebrew. Joseph simply refers to God and not the more personal Yahweh. Another reading of this might be because of the later rabbinic reading. They argue that Elohim is used to reference the just characteristics of God, and Yahweh as the merciful ones. Joseph is possibly referencing the just characteristic because of the crime it would be against God. Another interesting point comes in the next verse. This is the focal point in the theological theme of Judah verses Joseph. In the Judah and Tamar story, Judah sleeps with Tamar and, in so doing, commits evil. In contrast, Potiphar's wife "coaxed Joseph day after day, yet he did not yield to her request to lie beside her" (Gen 39:10). Judah sees Tamar and lies with her, yet Joseph cannot be coaxed to sin even when she does so day after day. Thus, Judah forfeits his birthright by sinning, and Joseph receives it through his faithfulness and steadfastness, even in the presence of temptation.

The last of the themes is found in vv. 20–23. This is the fall of Joseph back to his former status of slave, but now he is in prison. This prison was probably for political prisoners. We do not have many accounts of prisoners or prisons from the Egyptian material. The only occurrences we have of the usage of the word *sohar* (prison) are found here in Genesis. Because of the lack of other occurrences it makes for an unusual word. It is not clear why this is. One reason for the lack of jails is because most often the accused would be executed. This was the precedent throughout the ancient Near East, and thus there was little need for prisons. However, because of the others confined with Joseph (the cupbearer and baker), it would seem that this is a royal prison. Many scholars have puzzled over why Joseph was put here by Potiphar. Usually the slave would have been immediately executed. This leaves the question, was Potiphar questioning the guilt of Joseph? But the counterargument is that Potiphar was exceedingly angry with him. Scholars are unsure why Joseph was sentenced there. But perhaps it was according to the will of God.

One of the most interesting literary structures in this chapter is the *inclusio*. This encompasses the whole chapter and, in fact, may be a smaller unit to a much larger one. The beginning of the *inclusio* is Joseph's arrival

4. W. Gunther Plaut, ed., *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1962), 257.

in Egypt as a slave and his being sold to the highest bidder. He is at one of the lowest points to which a human could descend in the ancient world. He goes on to rise to power and influence in Potiphar's house and is made master over all that Potiphar has. However, after his temptation he is reduced again to his former status. Thus, we have an *inclusio* beginning in v. 1 and ending in v. 22. This is probably part of a much larger literary *inclusio* unit because of the repeat experience in prison and again with Pharaoh.

Grammatical Data

This portion is relatively unimportant for this chapter and pericope. There are a couple of minor variant readings, but nothing of significance. The ones that do appear are variants such as "his house" instead of "the house." Because of the lack of variants, I will not spend time explaining the relatively few and minor ones that do exist. Instead I will continue with lexical information on certain words. There are a few that need explaining because of ambiguity or their importance on the text.

Chief steward. Potiphar is described as being the chief steward for Pharaoh. This meant he was in charge of the prison. This might explain why he had Joseph placed there instead of having him executed.

Courtier. The Hebrew word *saris* means "eunuch." This has caused debate among scholars. Often it has been associated with responsibility over harems. Thus, it has been assumed that Potiphar was chief over Pharaoh's harem. However, this seems unlikely. Scholars now debate the issue. On the other hand, this could be important in the story of Joseph's temptation. Because of the lack of sexual fulfillment from her husband due to his position, Potiphar's wife may have been turning to Joseph for that fulfillment.

Coax. This is an interesting word in this context. It means "to influence or gently urge by caressing or flattering."⁵ Because of Joseph's initial refusal, Potiphar's wife attempts to go about it by gentle persuasion over an extended period of time.

The dating of this text is difficult because we only have it in the full text. We are able to accurately date the Leningrad Codex and the Masoretic Text, but this does not help with the specific dating of this passage. Because there are few clues (such as poetry, etc.), one must date the narrative according to the book of Genesis, or the source that wrote it. J is believed to have been written around 950 B.C.E. It is one of the earliest sources. Thus, the account would have been recorded fairly early, much earlier than those who believe it to have been written subsequent to the exile.

5. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed. (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 2004), 237.

Biblical Context

I have attempted to look individually at the unique sections of this chapter to provide a better understanding of the message of this pericope. As a result of a closer reading of this passage, two main themes are evident. The first is manifest by the location of the chapter. It is put right after the story of Judah and Tamar and is explicit in the contrasting ideas of the two chapters. Chapter 39 is emphasizing the righteousness of Joseph and legitimizing the reason for him receiving the birthright later. The next main emphasis of the chapter is the parallel formulae found at the beginning and the end. This stresses the importance that the Lord is with Joseph and that Joseph is being watched over and protected by the divine. Another literary aspect that stresses this is the *inclusio*. Both literary units provide a structure that is unmistakable for the reader to understand the important message being shared. The importance of this chapter can be seen by the way others used this in scripture.

We find other references throughout scripture that talk about and discuss Joseph. Most often it is in regard to genealogy. The genealogy gives reference to the sons of Joseph to state the lines which they come through. But it is used in other ways as well. Often it is given to show the mercy of the Lord in preserving Joseph and making him successful, which is the subject and purpose of the story. It can be found within the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. Luke references it in Acts 7:9, 13–14, 18. The tone is somewhat condemning of the Patriarchs and the way they dealt with God's favored one. Also in Joshua 17, we have reference to it when the land of promise is being divided among the children of Israel. In 1 Chronicles 5:12, we have the explanation of why Reuben forfeited the birthright and why it eventually was given to Joseph.

Theology

As stated above, this passage has large theological importance. Much of the theological message has already been covered above. This message in chapter 39 applies to the Mosaic covenant. The most prominent theme here is Joseph's temptation. The need for personal moral cleanliness was of utmost importance. Not only is he able to resist the initial approach and offer by Potiphar's wife but also the constant coaxing. This later one is the more difficult, because he must never let his guard down. But Joseph is rewarded for his goodness, and because of Joseph's righteousness he is eventually given the birthright by his father Jacob. The protection that the Lord provides Joseph with while he is in Egypt is obvious. Most often, people who committed the sin of which they were accused would have been executed rather than imprisoned. Also, Joseph rises to prominence and power until he becomes second in command over all of Egypt.

This protection and prosperity is a result of the covenant made by his father with God. He was a recipient of those direct blessings.

It is also difficult to miss the typology of Joseph as a foreshadowing of Christ. The Hebrew scriptures do this with many of the major prophets. We have examples with Isaiah, Elijah, and others. Here Joseph is taken down to Egypt in exile and as an outcast. Christ was taken down to Egypt as well because of the persecution under Herod the Great. Joseph was betrayed by those closest to him, as was Christ, both by the Jews as a whole, as well as one of his closest friends. While Joseph's rise to power was physical, it was due to his righteousness and by following the commandments. Christ rose in spiritual power through his perfect obedience. There are also many other theological aspects of this passage. Many of the Early Christian Fathers read this passage very allegorically. They felt the theological power of the passage was not in the physical temptations and triumphs but in the spiritual ones.

Often in scripture the purpose of the story is both figurative as well as literal. Sometimes it is difficult to know which one should be applied. But quite often, it should be both. But regardless of the reading, it would provide a strong theological passage that would be supported later by interpretations. This is a very important text and would be considered valuable by those later interpreters and readers.

Secondary Literature

The literature on Genesis 39 is somewhat staggering in proportion. So much has been written on the topic of Joseph's temptation, and his experience in general. This is because of the many different interpretations and commentaries, depending on the religious views and backgrounds of the individual author.

However, as I have reviewed much of this, I have noticed that they could be categorized in two different groups. While there are many differences within the groups, the standard within each is relatively the same. The two categories would consist of the literal interpreters and the figurative ones. While the first of the two categories is the more populated one, there are others that tend toward a more figurative reading. Much of the controversy focuses on the temptation of Joseph. While I agree with some of what the scholars have written, other parts I do not. Skinner's commentary is very good. He leans toward a more literal reading but makes some figurative points as well. The other part of his work was beneficial is the footnotes. Another helpful commentator is Dr. Gary Rendsburg, who is considered one of the leading authorities on the book of Genesis. While most of his scholarship tends to be more conservative, he does a good job of acknowledging views outside his own.

Another interesting point that most of the scholars touched on were the similarities found between the Joseph story and the Egyptian parallel of the

“Tale of Two Brothers.” They see many strong correlations between these two stories, and there are even scholars that argue that the later Joseph story was built around this earlier Egyptian mythological tale. While I disagree with this view, many of the correlations are very interesting. While much can be learned by a close reading of the Bible, we need to be careful that we do not apply our own readings onto the text simply because that is what we want it to say.