

## Sarna: Essential background to the Joseph narratives

### *The uniqueness of the Joseph narrative*

Apart from the Judah and Tamar episode and Jacob's farewell blessing, the rest of the Book of Genesis is devoted to the story of Joseph.

In numerous ways, this section differs markedly from the preceding patriarchal biographies. It is by far the longest and most complete account, and it isn't a collection of isolated incidents. There is an unparalleled continuity of narrative set forth with the consummate skill of a master story-teller who employs to the full the novelistic techniques of character delineation, psychological treatment, the play upon the emotions and the cultivation of suspense.

Unique, too, is the somewhat secular mold in which the biography is cast. The miraculous or supernatural element is conspicuously absent. With the apparent exception of a single incident which involves Jacob, not Joseph, there are no divine revelations, no altars, no cultic associations. God never intervenes openly and directly in Joseph's life as He does with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

On the one hand, there is an unusual lack of specifics. Other than the vague "land of Goshen," there are no place-names, and nowhere do we learn the name of the pharaoh.

On the other hand, the Joseph biography is distinguished by a wealth of background material, detailing the customs, practices and conditions of a non-Israelite people—matters outside the Torah's scope of interest in the patriarchal stories. This may probably be accounted for by the fact that the descent of the children of Israel to Egypt was an event heavy with destiny, for it was the indispensable prelude to the drama of oppression and redemption which is the over-riding motif of biblical theology.

Yet this experience, which the Torah presents as having been fraught with eternal spiritual significance, was the culmination of a chain of events set in motion by initial causes which were temporal, petty, sordid and mundane in the extreme. A father's favoritism, tittle-tattle, sibling jealousies, egotistic boyish dreams—all the unlovely elements of a family situation containing the infallible ingredients of explosive tragedy—such was the raw material which Providence was to shape to its own purposes.

### *Familial disharmony*

The narrative opens with a picture of the 17-year-old Joseph who commands none of our sympathies. The "bad reports" of his brothers which Joseph brings to his father were certainly not calculated to endear him to them; nor was the garment which Jacob presented him likely to ameliorate the brothers' antipathy. To the brothers, the "coat of many colors" was a hated symbol of favoritism and a cause of discord.

Even more potent a source of disharmony were Joseph's dreams. The strong feelings they aroused must be understood against the background of the times. Throughout the biblical world, dreams were recognized as vehicles of divine communication. Several instances of this have already been encountered. God revealed His will in dreams to Avimelech, King of Gerar, to Jacob and to Lavan. In each experience, the theophany is straightforward and the message perfectly clear. This isn't the case with Joseph's dreams, nor with those of the butler and the baker, and Pharaoh. Here, the symbol, not the words, is the language of intelligence, and the dream is therefore enigmatic.

Against this background, it isn't to be wondered at that dreams are frequently productive of anxiety. To be ignorant of the true meaning is to be deprived of knowledge that might well be vital to one's welfare. Notice how in each of the cryptic dreams God doesn't figure explicitly in the content.

Yet it is tacitly accepted that He is the ultimate source of the message being conveyed. This doesn't mean the ancients didn't recognize such a thing as an idle dream. They did; and that is why dreams in the Joseph biography always come in pairs, to prove their seriousness.

In the two great centers of Near Eastern civilization, Egypt and Mesopotamia, at either extremity of the Fertile Crescent, the science of dream interpretation was highly developed as a specialized skill, and a vast literature devoted to the subject came into being. We're told, for example, that seeing a large cat in a dream is good, for it portends a large harvest. Looking into a deep well, on the other hand, is bad, for it is premonitory of incarceration.

The accepted predictive aspect of dreams was cause enough for the brothers to take Joseph seriously. But insofar as a dream was recognized to be inseparable from personality, it meant also that the dreamer somehow bore a measure of responsibility for his dreams. Joseph's visions of lordship, therefore, betrayed his true aspirations and contained, at the same time, the potentiality of fulfillment. That is why they could arouse hostility so intense as to culminate in a conspiracy to murder.

### ***Tiu sale into slavery***

The opportunity for mischief arose when Joseph was sent by his father to visit his brothers who had driven the sheep far from home in search of pasture. The road led from Hebron to Shechem and on to Dotan, where Joseph finally caught up with his brothers. This route corresponds exactly to the ancient north-south road west of the Jordan which traversed the central hill country the entire length of the Palestinian watershed. Each of the cities mentioned was an important town along this road. Dotan, in the Valley of Jezreel, has been excavated since 1953 and is known to have existed as early as 3000 B.C.E

It was here at Dotan that the brothers stripped Joseph of his tunic, threw him into a pit and then sold him into slavery to wandering caravan traders, alternately called Ishmaelites and Midianites. The variation may well be due to an interweaving of different traditions. It is also possible that "Ishmaelite" is here not used as an ethnic designation, but simply as an appellative for nomadic merchants. Support for this may be found elsewhere in the Tanach where, in a parenthetical note explaining why Midianites possessed golden earrings, we are told that it was "because they were Ishmaelites" (Judges 8.24). The traders, whoever they were, brought Joseph down to Egypt and sold him in the slave market.

The chief source for the supply of slaves in Egypt was war with foreign countries. Peaceful slave-trafficking was also well established and both Syria and Palestine fed the market. Two documents from Egyptian sources well illustrate this particular type of commerce in human misery. One is the last will and testament of King Amen-em-het III (end of the 19th century B.C.E.) in which he disposes of four Asiatic slaves, received as a gift from his brother. Far more interesting is a papyrus from ca. 1740 B.C.E., a section of which is an inventory of servants on an estate. Of the 95 slaves listed by name, 37 are Semitic.

### ***In Potiphar's house***

The caravan traders disposed of Joseph to a certain Potiphar, a courtier and chief steward of Pharaoh himself. The name of Joseph's master is all but identical with that of his future father-in-law Potiphara, and has possibly been deliberately abbreviated in order to distinguish the one from the other. The name itself has now been duplicated in Egyptian sources in the form of Pa-di-pa-re meaning, "He whom Re (the sun-god) has given." Personal names compounded of Pa-di and a divine appellative are very common in the Egyptian onomasticon.

The description “chief steward,” literally “chief cook,” appended to Potiphar would correspond to an Egyptian title which originally also meant “cook,” but which came to be a general designation for people attached to the services of nobles, princes and kings.

Unfortunately, the name of the pharaoh for whom Potiphar worked isn't given, an omission that greatly complicates the chronological problem. The title “Pharaoh” originally was a composite of two words meaning “the great house,” referring to the royal palace. It wasn't until the 15th century B.C.E. that it came into use as signifying the king. This extension of usage has its parallel in the English reference to the king as “the Crown.”

Joseph won the confidence of his master by his diligence and administrative abilities and soon found himself promoted to be Potiphar's personal attendant and overseer of the entire estate. This function conforms to that frequently encountered in Egyptian texts as *mer-per*, or comptroller.

### ***Potiphar's wife***

The authentic Egyptian coloration of the Joseph biography, apparent in numerous details, finds its strongest expression in the story of the unsuccessful attempt by Potiphar's wife to seduce Joseph. The motif isn't uncommon in world literature. One is reminded of several Greek tales, as well as of similar stories in the Arabian Nights and the Decameron. But since the “Tale of Two Brothers” is easily the oldest version of all, and since it originated on Egyptian soil, it is clearly of special interest to the study of the Joseph narrative.

The Egyptian story tells of two brothers, Anubis and Bata, who lived together. Anubis was married, Bata was a bachelor. One day, when the former wasn't at home, his wife tried to seduce Bata who virtuously rejected her advances. Knowing well her fate should her husband discover the truth, the guilty wife anticipated events by slandering the hapless Bata, who was forced to make a hasty flight from the murderous intentions of Anubis who followed in hot pursuit. Bata succeeded, finally, in convincing his brother of his innocence, and Anubis returned home, slew his wife and threw her body into the river.

It is very unlikely that this particular story was the direct source of the tale about Joseph and Potiphar's wife. However, as an Egyptian literary theme, it may well have influenced the artistic form in which the biblical story has been recorded.

A contrasting analysis of the two stories will help clarify the distinctive biblical presentation and make manifest the spirit which animated it.

The “Tale of Two Brothers” is a genre of literature intended for purely idle entertainment. It is adorned with several mythological elements such as talking cows, the miraculous appearance of a river, the resurrection of the dead, and many others. A particularly repulsive item is the self-mutilation of Bata who casts his dismembered limb into the river where it is swallowed by a fish. All these aspects of the Egyptian story find no echo in the biblical narrative.

Another basic difference is the scriptural silence about the fate of the temptress, usually a prominent element in this type of literature. The reason for this disinterest is that our story wasn't intended for entertainment purposes and wasn't told for its own sake. The focus of attention is upon Joseph's reaction and upon the incident as a causative link in the chain of events leading to Joseph's subsequent rise to power, his reconciliation with his brothers and their settlement in Egypt.

### ***Joseph the mature adult***

The picture of Joseph as it emerges from the pages of this biblical narrative is far different from that of Joseph back in his father's home. So skillfully has our story been set forth, that in our sympathy and admiration for the hero's nobility of character, we have forgotten those displeasing traits that alienated us at the outset. Joseph is now the unconscious instrument of God's providence and his behavior in the face of temptation demonstrated his worthiness for the role. The moral excellence of the young man can be appreciated all the more if it can be remembered that he was a slave and that sexual promiscuity was a perennial feature of all slave societies. Moreover, the ambitious Joseph might well have considered that the importuning wife of his master had presented him with a rare opportunity, worth exploiting, to advance his personal and selfish interests.

Probably nothing is more indicative of the wide chasm separating Israel from its neighbors than the line of argument used by Joseph in rejecting the repeated entreaties of the would-be adulteress. Speaking to a pagan woman, he says that his submission would be both a violation of the confidence placed in him by his master, and a sin against God. This conforms to the general biblical view, noted already many times, that the moral law has universal application, equally binding upon all humanity.

At the same time, this plea of Joseph expresses another distinctive biblical concept of morality. Adultery is a sin against God. It isn't a matter of social impropriety or breach of convention, not just an indignity to the husband or an outrage upon society. It is a religious offense in which God is vitally involved. In other words, the sanction of morality is divine, not social, and for this reason morality is absolute and not relative.

The same idea was expressed by Abraham when he feared the violation of his wife at the hands of the men of Gerar. "I thought," said Abraham, "surely there is no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife."

This concept of morality as God-given, rather than utilitarian, suffuses the Torah legislation and explains a fundamental difference in its treatment of adultery from that of the ancient law codes of the Near East. In the latter, the guilty parties are regarded as having committed an affront to the husband who, for that reason, is accorded the power to determine the punishment. The Torah, however, regarding the breach of morality as a sin against God, departs radically from Near Eastern custom and makes no such provision for the husband to exercise his discretion.

### ***The interpretation of dreams***

Why Potiphar chose to incarcerate Joseph instead of executing him, as might have been expected, we can never know. Being an officer of the court, Potiphar put Joseph among the royal prisoners in what is eight times referred to in our Hebrew text as the *beit ha-Sohar*. This term is nowhere else to be found in the Tanach and may well be of Egyptian origin.

If it be Hebrew, then since the basic root may possibly carry with it the idea of roundness, it may well refer to a house of detention within a fortress in which royal prisoners were confined. We do know from Egyptian texts that such, indeed, was the practice.

In prison, Joseph's winsome personality and transparent integrity soon won him the confidence and favor of the chief jailer. This allowed Joseph to come into contact with royal prisoners—the chief cupbearer and the chief baker. The former held an important office in the court of Pharaoh, and was actually a trusted advisor of the king. In a document from the time of Rameses III (12th century B.C.E.) we even find butlers sitting as judges.

The office of chief baker is interesting in the light of what is known of Egyptian gastronomy. No less than 57 varieties of bread and 38 different types of cake are attested in the texts. The baker is reflecting native epicurean propensity when he dreams of baskets containing “all kinds of food that a baker prepares.”

The same careful attention to local background is revealed in the narration of Pharaoh’s dreams. The river Nile, from which emerged the contrasting types of cows, is called in the Hebrew *ye’or*, a word corresponding to the Egyptian word for river and applied especially to the Nile. It is of some interest to note that this form of the word was in use only from the 18th dynasty on (1546-1085). The cows, themselves, provide yet another local touch, for they were abundant and important in the Egyptian economy in contrast to sheep, which played a very minor role. This is the exact reverse of the situation in Palestine.

Turning now to a different aspect of the dreams, whereas the cupbearer, baker and Pharaoh all needed the services of an interpreter to extract meaning from the imagery, Joseph’s dreams, although falling into the same symbolic category, were at once comprehensible to the narrator and his brothers. This distinction is more than incidental. Despite the fact that Israel shared with its pagan neighbors a belief in the reality of dreams as a medium of divine communication, it never developed, as in Egypt and Mesopotamia, a class of professional interpreters or a dream literature. In the entire Tanach, only two Israelites engage in the interpretation of dreams, Joseph and Daniel, and significantly enough, each serves a pagan monarch, the one in Egypt, the other in Mesopotamia, precisely the lands in which dream interpretation flourished. Moreover, in each case, the Israelite is careful to disclaim any innate ability, attributing all to God. Nor does skill at dream interpretation play any part in the definition of biblical wisdom or the equipment of prophet and sage.

# Vayeshev, Genesis 37.1-40.23

## Chapter 37

1 Now Jacob was settled in the land where his father had sojourned, the land of Canaan. 2 This, then, is the line of Jacob: At 17 years of age, Joseph tended the flocks with his brothers, as a helper to the sons of his father's wives Bilhah and Zilpah. And Joseph brought bad [malicious—CS] reports of them to their father. 3 Now Israel loved Joseph best of all his sons, for he was the child of his old age; and he had made him an ornamented tunic ["a coat of many colors"—REF, CS; meaning of Hebrew uncertain]. 4 And when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of his brothers, they hated him so that they could not speak a friendly word [speak a friendly greeting—REF; could not bare to speak peaceably—CS] to him.

5 Once Joseph had a dream which he told to his brothers; and they hated him even more. 6 He said to them, "Hear this dream which I have dreamed: 7 There we were binding sheaves in the field, when suddenly my sheaf stood up and remained upright; then your sheaves gathered around and bowed low to my sheaf." 8 His brothers answered, "Do you mean to reign over us? Do you mean to rule over [dominate—REF] us?" And they hated him even more for his talk about his dreams. 9 He dreamed another dream and told it to his brothers, saying, "Look, I have had another dream: And this time, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me." 10 And when he told it to his father and brothers, his father berated him [was annoyed at him—REF]. "What," he said to him, "is this dream you have dreamed? Are we to come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow low to you to the ground?" 11 So his brothers were wrought up at [detested—RA; jealous of—REF, CS] him, and his father kept the matter in mind.

12 One time, when his brothers had gone to pasture their father's flock at Shechem, 13 Israel said to Joseph, "Your brothers are pasturing at Shechem. Come, I will send you to them." He answered, "I am ready." 14 And he said to him, "Go and see how your brothers are and how the flocks are faring, and bring me back word." So he sent him from the valley of Hebron. When he reached Shechem, 15 a man came upon him wandering in the fields. The man asked him, "What are you looking for?" 16 He answered, "I am looking for my brothers. Could you tell me where they are pasturing?"

### **Coat of Many Colors**

**REF:** We have no idea what the Hebrew means. Some have tried to derive something about its meaning from the story of Tamar, who is wearing one when her brother Amnon rapes her (2 Samuel 13; see WGP below). It is hardly coincidental that the two people who wear a coat of many colors in the Tanach are both victims of violence by their brothers, and that both coats are torn. The significance of the coat, therefore, is as a symbol of injustice among siblings. This significance is doubled when we see the fate of the coat further on.

**WGP:** Interpretations vary: a needlework tunic, or a long-sleeved, or ornamented one, displaying a multicolored design, or had other distinctive features. According to 2 Samuel 13.18 such a garment was worn by virgin daughters of the royal house.

**RA:** As per 2 Samuel, it appears to be a unisex garment and a product of ancient haute couture. E.A. (Ephraim) Speiser cites a cuneiform text with an apparently cognate phrase that seems to indicate a tunic with applique ornamentation. Other scholars have pointed to a 14th-century B.C.E. Egyptian fresco showing captive Canaanite noblemen adorned with tunics made of longitudinal panels sewn together.

Guide to the Translators and Commentators used here

EF: Everett Fox    REF: Richard Elliott Friedman    RA: Robert Alter    NS: Nahum Sarna    CS: Chaim Stern  
SRH: Samson Raphael Hirsch    RASHI: Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak    OJPS: Old Jewish Publication Society version  
WGP: W. Gunther Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*    TWC: *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*



17 The man said, “They have gone from here, for I heard them say: Let us go to Dotan.” So Joseph followed his brothers and found them at Dotan.

18 They saw him from afar, and before he came close to them they conspired to kill him. 19 They said to one another, “Here comes that dreamer! 20 Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; and we can say, ‘A savage beast devoured him.’ We shall see what comes of his dreams!”

21 But when Reuben heard it, he tried to save him from them. He said, “Let us not take his life.” 22 And Reuben went on, “Shed no blood! Cast him into that pit out in the wilderness, but do not touch him yourselves”—intending to save him from them and restore him to his father. 23 When Joseph came up to his brothers, they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the ornamented tunic that he was wearing, 24 and took him and cast him into the pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. 25 Then they sat down to a meal. Looking up, they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, their camels bearing gum, balm, and ladanum to be taken to Egypt. 26 Then Judah said to his brothers, “What do we gain by killing our brother and covering up his blood? 27 Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, but let us not do away with him ourselves. After all, he is our brother, our own flesh.” His brothers agreed. 28 When Midianite traders passed by, they pulled Joseph up out of the pit. They sold Joseph for 20 pieces of silver to the Ishmaelites, who brought Joseph to Egypt.

29 When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he rent his clothes. 30 Returning to his brothers, he said, “The boy is gone! Now, what am I to do [where am I to go—TEXT, REF, CS, RA]?” 31 Then they took Joseph’s tunic, slaughtered a kid, and dipped the tunic in the blood. 32 They had the ornamented tunic taken to their father, and they said, “We found this. Please examine it; is it your son’s tunic or not?” 33 He recognized it, and said, “My son’s tunic! A savage beast devoured him! Joseph was torn by a beast [is torn to shreds—RA]!” 34 Jacob rent his clothes, put sackcloth on his loins, and observed mourning for his son many days. 35 All his sons and daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, saying, “No, I will go down mourning to my son in Sheol.” Thus his father bewailed him. 36 The Midianites [Hebrew “Medanites”], meanwhile, sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, a courtier of Pharaoh and his chief steward.

### ***The pit was empty***

**RA:** Deep cisterns of this sort—too deep to climb out of—were commonly used for water storage.

**REF:** Rashi takes this to be redundant: if it is empty, of course there’s no water in it. He concludes that there are snakes and scorpions in it. But it isn’t redundant. Rather, two things are conveyed: It *is* empty. This conveys that he is alone and helpless; no water in it conveys that his survival is in danger.

### ***Ishmaelites***

**RA:** This is a generic term for the seminomadic traders of Arab <tock whose homeland was east of the Jordan, but it is also an anachronism, since at the time of the story, the eponymous Ishmael, the great-uncle of the 12 brothers, was still alive (though he would be near the end of his 127-year life span), and the only “Ishmaelites” would be their second cousins

## Chapter 38

1 About that time Judah left his brothers and camped near a certain Adullamite whose name was Hirah. 2 There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua, and he married her and cohabited with her. 3 She conceived and bore a son, and he named him Er. 4 She conceived again and bore a son, and named him Onan. 5 Once again she bore a son, and named him Shelah; he was at Ch'ziv when she bore him.

6 Judah got a wife for Er his first-born; her name was Tamar. 7 But Er, Judah's first-born, was displeasing to the Lord [was wicked in the sight of the Eternal—CS; was evil in the eyes of the Lord—RA], and the Lord took his life. 8

Then Judah said to Onan, "Join with your brother's wife and do your duty by her as a brother-in-law, and provide offspring for your brother."

9 But Onan, knowing that the seed would not count as his, let it go to waste [lit. "spoil on the ground"] whenever he joined with his brother's wife, so as not to provide offspring for his brother [so to give no seed to his brother—RA; also REF]. 10 What he did was displeasing to the Lord [was wicked in the sight of the Eternal—CS], and He took his life also. 11 Then Judah

said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, "Stay as a widow in your father's house until my son Shelah grows up"—for he thought, "He too might die like his brothers." So Tamar went to live in her father's house.

12 A long time afterward, Shua's daughter, the wife of Judah, died. When his period of mourning was over [lit. "he was comforted"], Judah went up to Timnah to his sheepshearers, together with his friend Hirah the Adullamite. 13 And Tamar was told, "Your father-in-law is coming up to Timnah for the sheepshearing." 14 So she took off her widow's garb, covered her face with a veil, and, wrapping herself up, sat down at the entrance to Enaim [Others "in an open or visible place" as per REF, or "at the crossroad"], which is on the road to Timnah; for she saw that Shelah was grown up, yet she had not been given to him as wife. 15 When Judah saw her, he took her for a harlot; for she had covered her face. 16 So he turned aside to her by the road and said, "Here, let me sleep with you"—for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. "What," she asked, "will you pay for sleeping with me?" 17 He replied, "I will send a kid from my flock." But she said, "You must leave a pledge until you have sent it." 18 And he said, "What pledge shall I give you?" She replied, "Your seal and cord, and the staff which you carry." So he gave them to her and slept with her, and she conceived by him. 19 Then she went on her way. She took off her veil and again put on her widow's garb.

20 Judah sent the kid by his friend the Adullamite, to redeem the pledge from the woman; but he could not find her.

### Deuteronomy 25:5-10

When brothers dwell together and one of them dies and leaves no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married to a stranger, outside the family. Her husband's brother shall unite with her: he shall take her as his wife and perform the levir's duty. The first son that she bears shall be accounted to the dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out in Israel. But if the man does not want to marry his brother's widow, his brother's widow shall appear before the elders in the gate and declare, "My husband's brother refuses to establish a name in Israel for his brother; he will not perform the duty of a levir."

The elders of his town shall then summon him and talk to him. If he insists, saying, "I do not want to marry her," his brother's widow shall go up to him in the presence of the elders, pull the sandal off his foot, spit in his face, and make this declaration: Thus shall be done to the man who will not build up his brother's house! And he shall go in Israel by the name of "the family of the unsandaled one."



21 He inquired of the people of that town, “Where is the cult prostitute, the one at Enaim, by the road?” But they said, “There has been no prostitute here.” 22 So he returned to Judah and said, “I could not find her; moreover, the townspeople said: There has been no prostitute here.” 23 Judah said, “Let her keep them, lest we become a laughingstock [we’ll be a disgrace—REF]. I did send her this kid, but you did not find her.”

24 About three months later, Judah was told, “Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the harlot; in fact, she is with child by harlotry [whoring—REF, CS, RA].” “Bring her out,” said Judah, “and let her be burned.” 25 As she was being brought out, she sent this message to her father-in-law, “I am with child by the man to whom these belong.” And she added, “Examine these: whose seal and cord and staff are these?” 26 Judah recognized them, and said, “She is more in the right than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah.” And he was not intimate with her again.

27 When the time came for her to give birth, there were twins in her womb! 28 While she was in labor [giving birth—REF, CS, RA], one of them put out his hand, and the midwife tied a crimson thread on that hand, to signify: This one came out first. 29 But just then he drew back his hand, and out came his brother; and she said, “What a breach [Hebrew perets] you have made for yourself!” So he was named Peretz. 30 Afterward his brother came out, on whose hand was the crimson thread; he was named Zerach [i.e., “brightness,” perhaps alluding to the crimson thread].

## Chapter 39

1 When Joseph was taken down to Egypt, a certain Egyptian, Potiphar, a courtier of Pharaoh and his chief steward [chief of the guards—REF; captain of the guard—CS; high chamberlain—RA], 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 and that the Lord lent success to everything he undertook, 4 he took a liking to Joseph. He made him his personal attendant [he ministered to him—RA, also CS] 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 garment and said, "Lie with me!" But he left his garment in her hand and got away and fled outside. 13 When she saw that he had left it in her hand and had fled outside, 14 she called out to her servants and said to them, "Look, he had to bring us a Hebrew to dally with 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 garment with me and got away and fled outside."

16 She kept his garment 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 dally with me; 18 but when I screamed at the top of my voice, he left his garment 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 [lit. "his"] charge, because the Lord was with him, and whatever he did the Lord made successful.

## Chapter 40

1 Sometime later, the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt gave offense to their lord the king of Egypt. 2 Pharaoh was angry with his two courtiers, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker, 3 and put them in custody, in the house of the chief steward, in the same prison house where Joseph was confined. 4 The chief steward assigned Joseph to them, and he attended them. When they had been in custody for some time, 5 both of them—the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt, who were confined in the prison—dreamed in the

### POINTS TO PONDER

1. It says "she told him the same story," but did she really? What differences are there between what she said to the other slaves and what she said to Potiphar—and consider the nuances in answering.
2. Potiphar "was furious," but at whom and why?
3. Joseph is into a prison "where the king's prisoners were confined." Not just a prison, but a special one, for VIP prisoners and apparently under Potiphar's oversight. What does this suggest?

same night, each his own dream and each dream with its own meaning. <sup>6</sup> When Joseph came to them in the morning, he saw that they were distraught. <sup>7</sup> He asked Pharaoh's courtiers, who were with him in custody in his master's house, saying, "Why do you appear downcast today?"

<sup>8</sup> And they said to him, "We had dreams, and there is no one to interpret them." So Joseph said to them, "Surely God can interpret! Tell me [your dreams]."

<sup>9</sup> Then the chief cupbearer told his dream to Joseph. He said to him, "In my dream, there was a vine in front of me. <sup>10</sup> On the vine were three branches. It had barely budded, when out came its blossoms and its clusters ripened into grapes. <sup>11</sup> Pharaoh's cup was in my hand, and I took the grapes, pressed them into Pharaoh's cup, and placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand."

<sup>12</sup> Joseph said to him, "This is its interpretation: The three branches are three days. <sup>13</sup> In three days Pharaoh will pardon you [lit. "lift up your head"] and restore you to your post; you will place Pharaoh's cup in his hand, as was your custom formerly when you were his cupbearer. <sup>14</sup> But think of me when all is well with you again, and do me the kindness of mentioning me to Pharaoh, so as to free me from this place. <sup>15</sup> For in truth, I was kidnapped from the land of the Hebrews; nor have I done anything here that they should have put me in the dungeon."

<sup>16</sup> When the chief baker saw how favorably he had interpreted, he said to Joseph, "In my dream, similarly, there were three openwork baskets [others "baskets with white bread" or "white baskets"; meaning of Hebrew *chori* uncertain] on my head. <sup>17</sup> In the uppermost basket were all kinds of food for Pharaoh that a baker prepares; and the birds were eating it out of the basket above my head." <sup>18</sup> Joseph answered, "This is its interpretation: The three baskets are three days. <sup>19</sup> In three days, Pharaoh will lift off your head and impale you upon a pole; and the birds will pick off your flesh." <sup>20</sup> On the third day—his birthday—Pharaoh made a banquet for all his officials, and he singled out [lit. "lifted the head of"] his chief cupbearer and his chief baker from among his officials. <sup>21</sup> He restored the chief cupbearer to his cup-bearing, and he placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand; <sup>22</sup> but the chief baker he impaled—just as Joseph had interpreted to them. <sup>23</sup> Yet the chief cupbearer did not think of Joseph; he forgot him.