

## Genesis 39

### Limits of the Text

Chapter 39 resumes the story of Joseph, picking up where 37:36 left off. This chapter has one main section, Joseph in Potiphar's house (39:1-20), and one transitional section, Joseph in Pharaoh's prison (39:21-23). The transitional section connects chapter 39 to chapter 40. It is linked to chapter 39 thematically, as Moses the narrator repeatedly noted that the Lord was with Joseph (39:2, 21), and it is linked to chapter 40 by location, the prison where Joseph resided. It would be acceptable to break the text at 39:21 or at 40:1. I favor the thematic link, thus in this document I keep the entire chapter together as one literary unit.

### Interpretation

In the first section of the text, the Lord was with Joseph in Potiphar's house.

39:1 Now Joseph had been brought down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, had bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there.

Why was it important to note Potiphar's occupation? The word for "officer" can mean a high-ranking court official, a eunuch, or both.<sup>1</sup> Morris speculates that Moses included this title as a way of explaining (though not justifying) why Potiphar's wife was predisposed to having affairs.<sup>2</sup> His occupation as captain of the guard was given to emphasize his importance;<sup>3</sup> this man was an aristocrat. His house was opulent and cultured; his guests were the movers and shakers of the land.<sup>4</sup>

39:2 The Lord was with Joseph, and he became a successful man, and he was in the house of his Egyptian master.

This verse establishes the overall theme of the chapter: The Lord was with Joseph, so whatever Joseph did he was successful at it.<sup>5</sup> Notice first the presence

---

<sup>1</sup> Swanson, DBLH 6247.

<sup>2</sup> Morris, 559.

<sup>3</sup> Waltke, 519.

<sup>4</sup> Hughes, 460.

<sup>5</sup> Sailhammer, 234.

of the Lord; he is not limited by geography or the nearness of family and church.<sup>6</sup> Notice second the cause and effect: Because the Lord was with him, Joseph was successful. God is the hero of this story, not Joseph. The following verses describe Joseph's success in Potiphar's house and in Pharaoh's prison.

Notice Moses' use of the name Yahweh in this chapter, the only chapter it is used in the Joseph story. Joseph didn't speak his name, but Yahweh was with Joseph as his situation fell (slavery), rose (head of Potiphar's house), fell (prison), and rose (head of Egypt). "We are to understand that at the most uncertain time of Joseph's life, when he could see nothing of God, the covenant God of Israel was at work to effect his covenant promises through Joseph."<sup>7</sup> Moses was emphasizing to the children of Israel that Yahweh, their faithful, covenant-keeping God, would be with them wherever they went, no matter what their situation.

Why was it significant that Joseph was in his master's house? "Joseph was a household servant, not a field hand. This gave Potiphar first-hand knowledge of Joseph's ability but also made him vulnerable to the sexual overtures of the wife of the house."<sup>8</sup>

[39:3 His master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord caused all that he did to succeed in his hands.](#)

Where did this Egyptian learn about Yahweh? Most likely Potiphar learned about Yahweh from Joseph himself. Whatever communication passed between slave and master, it was sufficient for the master to know the slave was being blessed by his God.

Notice that it was not Joseph who was amazing. His success did not come from his intelligence or his education or his business acumen; his success came from Yahweh. "This is not a story of the success of Joseph; rather it is a story of God's faithfulness to his promises."<sup>9</sup>

[39:4 So Joseph found favor in his sight and attended him, and he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had.](#)

---

<sup>6</sup> Greidanus, 387.

<sup>7</sup> Hughes, 461.

<sup>8</sup> Mathews, 731.

<sup>9</sup> Sailhammer, 234.

Joseph rose quickly through the ranks, going from household slave to personal attendant to overseer of the household. Life was now good for Joseph, easy in most ways; he had plenty of food, decent accommodations, a reasonable amount of respect, etc. Joseph was in a time of prosperity.

39:5 From the time that he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of the Lord was on all that he had, in house and field.

Exactly how the Lord blessed Potiphar is not stated, but presumably it was financially and materially. This looks ahead to how Joseph will do the same for Pharaoh (41:49; 47:20-21).

Why would God bless Potiphar for Joseph's sake? There are two reasons, one looking backward and one looking forward. The reason looking backward is found in 12:3, where God says to Abraham, "I will bless those who bless you" (ESV). The reason looking forward is found in 50:20. "The purpose of enriching those whom Joseph served and of establishing Joseph's reputation...was not an end in itself. God's blessing of Joseph resulted in his rise to power where he could provide sustenance and salvation for his family and for many (50:20)."<sup>10</sup>

39:6 So he left all that he had in Joseph's charge, and because of him he had no concern about anything but the food he ate. Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance.

Note the limitation on Joseph's responsibilities: In this verse it's Potiphar's food, but in 39:9 it's Potiphar's wife. There are at least three different ways to interpret this. One, it may be literal; that is, Joseph did not know how to fix Egyptian food properly, and even if he did there was to be ritual separation at mealtimes.<sup>11</sup> The statement in 39:9 would thus also be a literal statement. Two, it may be a figure of speech; that is, Potiphar's food referred to all of Potiphar's private affairs, which naturally included his wife.<sup>12</sup> Three, food may be a euphemism for wife;<sup>13</sup> that is, Joseph was not to "taste" his master's wife, so to speak. Either of the later two make more sense, but all three arrive at the same meaning: There were some things that were off-limits to Joseph, most notably his master's wife.

---

<sup>10</sup> Mathews, 732.

<sup>11</sup> Hamilton, quoted in Greidanus, 388.

<sup>12</sup> Waltke, 520.

<sup>13</sup> Mathews, 732-3.

The narrator's note on Joseph's good looks is a transition to the next sub-section, where Potiphar's wife attempted to seduce him. Apparently Joseph got his looks from his mother (29:17). Hughes estimates that Joseph was around 17 or 18 years old at this time.<sup>14</sup>

39:7 And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, "Lie with me."

Is "cast her eyes" a Hebrew idiom? A footnote in Greidanus' book notes that it means she "looked with desire at"<sup>15</sup> (which is pretty obvious), but doesn't help us with the origin of the expression.

Her first enticement was pretty straightforward: Let's have sex! Joseph was in a time of temptation. Sarna notes the irony in this situation, "She, the mistress of the house, is a slave to her lust for her husband's slave!"<sup>16</sup>

At this point, Joseph could have rationalized a "yes" response. Casual sex was common and acceptable in the culture. Potiphar's wife had needs that (apparently) her husband could not fulfill. No one would catch them, and even if they did, no one would mind.<sup>17</sup> His family would never find out. It would be good for his career. This would be the loving thing to do.<sup>18</sup> And so on. But Joseph did not rationalize; he did not succumb to situational ethics.

39:8 But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Behold, because of me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my charge.

39:9 He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?"

Joseph viewed the opportunity to have sex with Potiphar's wife as "great wickedness." Wicked means not morally good<sup>19</sup> and "wrong in regard to God's original and ongoing intention."<sup>20</sup> Joseph understood that adultery was very

---

<sup>14</sup> Hughes, 462.

<sup>15</sup> Greidanus, 388.

<sup>16</sup> Nahum Sarna, quoted in Waltke, 520.

<sup>17</sup> Morris, 561.

<sup>18</sup> Hughes, 462-3.

<sup>19</sup> Swanson, DBLH 8288.

<sup>20</sup> Harris, 854.

immoral and never part of God's plan; the essence of Ge 2:23-24 had been preserved.

Joseph gave three reasons why he would not sleep with her. First, it would be an abuse of Potiphar's trust. Second, it would be adultery. Third, it would be a sin against God. Joseph rightly perceived that sin is not only against man, but against God. David knew this when he wrote, "Against You—You alone—I have sinned and done this evil in Your sight" (Ps 51:4, HCSB).

Sailhammer notes an emphasis in this narrative that did not appear so much in the previous patriarchal narratives: God's covenantal faithfulness (in spite of human failure) and man's obedient response go hand-in-hand. Man's responsibility compliments God's sovereignty.<sup>21</sup>

Note the contrast in Joseph's actions with Judah's actions in 38:16-18.

39:10 And as she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her, to lie beside her or to be with her.

Apparently Joseph's well-reasoned argumentation didn't have much effect on her, because she kept after him. Her subsequent enticements were a bit more subtle: Ok, if you won't have sex with me, then just recline near me or even just simply hang out with me. No doubt she hoped that Joseph's enjoyment of the close proximity would lead to adultery. Although she tried to wear him down over time, Joseph perceived her intentions and wisely chose never to be alone with her.

39:11 But one day, when he went into the house to do his work and none of the men of the house was there in the house,

39:12 she caught him by his garment, saying, "Lie with me." But he left his garment in her hand and fled and got out of the house.

At this point, her enticement is back to straightforward: She physically, violently grabbed him and said, "Have sex with me!" The difference in this situation was that there were no witnesses. This was a golden opportunity! He could have sex and not get caught. But Joseph knew that even if Potiphar never caught them, God would know and would not be pleased. "The eyes of the Lord are everywhere, observing the wicked and the good" (Pr 15:3, HCSB). So he ran.

---

<sup>21</sup> Sailhammer, 235.

Perhaps Paul had this text in mind with he wrote to Timothy, “So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness” (2 Ti 2:22, ESV).

39:13 And as soon as she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled out of the house,

Her patient efforts to woo Joseph were not successful. “At that point, the passionate desire of Potiphar’s wife suddenly turned into the rage of a woman scorned.”<sup>22</sup> Once she realized he left his garment, probably an outer cloak, she set in motion a tale to get Joseph in trouble, altering it appropriately for each hearer. She was a skilled liar, a “subtle mistress of syntactic equivocation.”<sup>23</sup>

Her first accusation was to the other servants of the household.

39:14 she called to the men of her household and said to them, “See, he has brought among us a Hebrew to laugh at us. He came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice.

39:15 And as soon as he heard that I lifted up my voice and cried out, he left his garment beside me and fled and got out of the house.”

Why does Potiphar’s wife emphasize Potiphar’s actions (see also 39:17)? Did she refer more to purchasing Joseph or to elevating Joseph? There are a couple complementary implications. The first implication was that a Hebrew had no place being in Joseph’s position; this was xenophobia.<sup>24</sup> Mathews understands her argument to be like this: He never assimilated into Egyptian culture; as he’s not really one of us, he should not be this position.<sup>25</sup> Apparently if Joseph had slept with her, then he would have fit into the culture better. The second implication was that Joseph took advantage of Potiphar. Potiphar elevated him, and this was how he had repaid his kindness.

What does it mean “to laugh at us”? This verb is translated as “to humiliate us” (NET), “to make sport of us” (NASB95), and “to mock us” (NKJV). “The verb...here means to hold something up for ridicule, or to toy with something harmfully. Attempted rape would be such an activity, for it would hold the victim in contempt.”<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Morris, 562.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Alter, quoted in Hughes, 464.

<sup>24</sup> Waltke, 521.

<sup>25</sup> Mathews, 736.

<sup>26</sup> The NET Bible, Ge 39:14.

The second accusation was to her husband.

39:16 Then she laid up his garment by her until his master came home,  
39:17 and she told him the same story, saying, “The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us, came in to me to laugh at me.  
39:18 But as soon as I lifted up my voice and cried, he left his garment beside me and fled out of the house.”  
39:19 As soon as his master heard the words that his wife spoke to him, “This is the way your servant treated me,” his anger was kindled.  
39:20 And Joseph’s master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king’s prisoners were confined, and he was there in prison.

At this point in the story, Potiphar should have demanded Joseph’s death, but he didn’t. Why didn’t he? The reason is not stated in the text, but it is very interesting to observe that the object of Potiphar’s anger in 30:19 is deliberately ambiguous. Was it Joseph? His wife? The impending loss of Joseph’s valuable service? The text doesn’t say. The lighter sentence (i.e., imprisonment) suggests that Potiphar didn’t completely believe his wife. Perhaps he was aware of his wife’s amorous activities; perhaps Joseph argued his innocence (as he did in the pit; 42:21). In any case, Potiphar had been out-manuevered by his wife and had little choice but to remove Joseph from the house and punish him.

Why does the narrator note which prison Joseph was in? It’s noted because this the prison from which Joseph will come into contact with people from the apex of Egyptian society.<sup>27</sup> God was providentially working to save Joseph’s life—he should have been killed—and to position him to save his people from the coming famine.

In the second section of the text, the Lord was with Joseph in Pharaoh’s prison.

39:21 But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison.

It’s interesting to note that obedience, resisting temptation, does not necessary bring external reward. Joseph had preferred obedience to God over illicit sexual satisfaction, but now he was in jail. Joseph was in a time of adversity.

---

<sup>27</sup> Mathews, 738.

The reader might well respond, “Where’s the justice? Where is God?” Moses responded with the simple affirmation that God was still with him. Joseph’s location had changed, but his relationship with Yahweh had not. “God does not remove Joseph from suffering, but he remains with him in the midst of it.”<sup>28</sup>

What is steadfast love? This is the great Hebrew word *hesed*, and it means a loyal love or devotion, one that is steadfast based on a prior relationship.<sup>29</sup> It finds its fullest expression when used of God in his actions towards his covenant people, wherein he shows kindness when they are in trouble or have enemies.<sup>30</sup> This is real reason Joseph was not executed by Potiphar.

What do we learn from Ps 105:18-19? This Psalm recounts the history of Israel; a portion (16-22) is about Joseph. First, it informs us about Joseph’s condition, at least initially. His feet were in fetters and his neck in a collar of iron; prison was painful and restrictive. Second, it lets us know that God put Joseph in prison in order to test him. The Hebrew word here was used literally for refining precious metals by fire.<sup>31</sup> It was used figuratively for testing a person for the purpose of finding and removing sin from their lives.<sup>32</sup> God had summoned a famine on the land (16) and sent Joseph ahead (17) to save his people; before he raised him to be lord of Pharaoh’s house (21), he wanted to test and purify Joseph’s character.

39:22 And the keeper of the prison put Joseph in charge of all the prisoners who were in the prison. Whatever was done there, he was the one who did it.

39:23 The keeper of the prison paid no attention to anything that was in Joseph’s charge, because the Lord was with him. And whatever he did, the Lord made it succeed.

The rise in position that had occurred in Potiphar’s house was repeated in prison. God’s presence with Joseph caused him to succeed.

---

<sup>28</sup> Waltke, 524.

<sup>29</sup> Swanson, DBLH 2876.

<sup>30</sup> Brown, 338-9.

<sup>31</sup> Swanson, DBLH 7671.

<sup>32</sup> Harris, 778.

### **Three Levels of Narrative**

1. Personal History – This is a story about the rise and fall of Joseph’s fortunes in Egypt.
2. National History – This is the beginning of the story about how the children of Israel found themselves in Egypt.
3. Redemptive History – This is a story about how God began to position the man he had chosen to preserve his covenant people from the famine.

### **The Gospel**

1. What does this text teach us about ourselves? What need or deficiency in our lives does it expose? On our own we are unable to be who God’s wants us to be and unable to do what God wants us to do.
2. What does this text teach us about God? How does it reveal God’s grace to meet our need? God is sovereign. God is always with us. God constantly works providentially to prepare our hearts and to alter our situation (for better or worse).
3. How does this text stand in relation to the gospel? This text reflects a key aspect of our need for redemption through the gospel. We need a Savior who is always with us and constantly, providentially working in our lives.

### **Textual Outline**

1. The Lord was with Joseph in Potiphar’s house (1-20).
  - a. Joseph was trusted by his master (1-6).
  - b. Joseph was tempted by his master’s wife (7-20).
2. The Lord was with Joseph in Pharaoh’s prison (21-23).

### **Central Truth of the Text**

Moses wrote Genesis 39 in order to comfort the children of Israel with the knowledge that God was working in every situation of Joseph’s captivity.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> This CTT was influenced by Hughes (466) and Greidanus (386).

## Teaching Outline

God works in every situation in the lives of his people. Today I want you to be comforted with the knowledge that your heavenly Father is working in the situations of your life today. From this text in Genesis 39, we are going to see three different life situations where God is working.

1. We take comfort knowing that God is working in times of prosperity (1-6).
2. We take comfort knowing that God is working in times of temptation (7-20).
3. We take comfort knowing that God is working in times of adversity (21-23).

## Works Cited

- Brown, Francis, Samuel Rolles Driver, and Charles Augustus Briggs, *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*. 2000.
- Greidanus, Sydney. *Preaching Christ from Genesis: Foundations for Expository Sermons*. 2007.
- Harris, R. Laird, Robert Laird Harris, Gleason Leonard Archer and Bruce K. Waltke. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*. 1999.
- Hughes, R. Kent. *Genesis: Beginning & Blessing*. Preaching the Word. 2004.
- Mathews, Kenneth. *Genesis 11:27-50:26*. The New American Commentary. 2005.
- Morris, Henry. *The Genesis Record: A Scientific and Devotional Commentary on the Book of Beginnings*. 1976.
- Sailhammer, John. *Genesis*. The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Vol 2. 1990.
- Swanson, James. *Dictionary of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains: Hebrew*. 1997.
- Waltke, Bruce. *Genesis: A Commentary*. 2001.