

PARASHAH THIRTY-EIGHT

Genesis 41:1–37; Isaiah 29:1–16; Revelation 7:1–17

Notes by Tim Hegg

From the Prison to the Palace

The story of Joseph is one of a classic turnabout. The beloved son of his father is betrayed by his brothers, sold into slavery, convicted of a crime he did not commit, and sits incarcerated in an Egyptian prison. But in a single day all of this changes. From prison, Joseph is placed upon the throne of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh, ruler over the most powerful nation of that time.

The parallel to the life of Yeshua is too close to be missed. Yeshua, also the beloved of His Father, is betrayed by His own brothers, convicted of a spurious crime, and executed as a common criminal. He is put within the “prison walls” of a tomb, but on the third day resurrects from death to life, and then, after 40 days, ascends to the throne of the universe where He sits at the Father’s right hand, and reigns over all.

God’s ways are often mysterious to us, and His thoughts beyond our own capacity to comprehend. Often, the way of exultation is via the way of humility. “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24). It is to this reality that Paul admonishes us (Phil 2:5–11):

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Messiah Yeshua, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Yeshua every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Yeshua the Messiah is Master, to the glory of God the Father.

This is also what Yeshua meant when He taught: “But the greatest among you shall be your servant” (Matt. 23:11). The truly humble heart has reckoned with the fact that apart from God’s grace, all is lost. The fleeting moment of our life upon this earth amounts to nothing in view of the greatness of God’s eternity. Thus, we only are allowed to attain a truly noble significance in this life when we firmly live out the truth that “without Him, I can do nothing.” This is, of course, simply another way to describe genuine faith, for by its very nature, faith abandons reliance upon one’s own strength, and seeks to be renewed and strengthened by the Almighty.

But if there is one thing that our *parashah* confirms it is that God is the Sovereign of time and events. As in the previous chapter, so here, God turns the events of even the most powerful king to bring about His design. “The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases” (Prov. 21:1). He combines the service of court officials, the weather patterns, and especially dreams, to bring Joseph out of prison to his appointed place of authority. We may struggle to understand exactly how God’s sovereign control of the universe intersects with our own responsibility for the choices we make, but we cannot deny His overall control. The very fact that we pray is proof that we believe God can control all things.

So once again in our narrative, dreams play an important factor. Pharaoh most likely felt he had everything in his control. But he couldn’t control his dream patterns while asleep! Perhaps Pharaoh

had never heard of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, or if he had, he may have discounted this “God” as just an inferior foreign deity. Regardless, God brings two dreams to Pharaoh, each with the same message: famine would invade his land after a period of plenty.

But almost as a precursor of the coming enslavement of Israel in Egypt, and of the plagues that God would send to eventually free them, Pharaoh calls upon his court magicians (חֲרָטְמֵי מִצְרַיִם) to decipher the dream, but they were unable. Of course, they could have guessed, but they knew their lives hung in the balance, for to guess wrong would most likely mean their inevitable demise (the baker’s fate was probably still fresh in the minds of Pharaoh’s court). Besides that, the Hebrew term translated “magician” (Gen 41:8,24; Ex 7:11,22; 8:3,14-15; 9:11; Dan 1:20; 2:2) implies a soothsayer who relies upon some connection with evil spirits for his work. Egypt was well known for its connection with the occult, yet the enemy is powerless to see the future, and so Pharaoh’s court magicians were also powerless in this instance.

Enter Joseph! The cupbearer, after two years, senses that this is the time to play his best card: he reminds Pharaoh that he had been imprisoned because of “his (own) offences” and that while in prison he had likewise dreamed a dream (no coincidences here!) and that a “Hebrew youth” had correctly interpreted his dream. Joseph, far from home and family, remained a Hebrew and was known as a Hebrew! Against the strongest currents of societal pressure, he resisted assimilation.

So Pharaoh sends for Joseph. Pharaoh comes right to the point: “I have heard it said about you, that when you hear a dream you can interpret it.” Joseph’s first recorded words to Pharaoh make the stark contrast with the failed attempts of the magicians: “It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer” (v. 16). Needless to say, Joseph was known as a Hebrew because he had retained his firm faith in the God of his father. Think about it: would you have given God the credit when in Pharaoh’s viewpoint, this God was a rival deity to his own? This isn’t chutzpah, its faith in action. Faith in the Almighty overcomes fear and emboldens one to speak and live the truth in the face of overwhelming odds.

Joseph interprets the dreams, giving Pharaoh an opportunity to know in advance what kind of trouble was coming upon Egypt. But Joseph not only gives an interpretation of the dreams, he also suggests an administrative plan to avert the coming disaster. A tax of 20% would be levied upon the entire country, so that grain during the seven years of plenty could be stored away for the coming years of famine. Interestingly, the 20% figure is close to the combined tithes that would be given when the Torah was revealed at Sinai.

The fact that two dreams were given to Pharaoh meant that the matter was sure, and that it would come to pass in the immediate future (“God will quickly [מֵהָרָ, *mahar*] bring it about”). The seven years of plenty were upon them, so action needed to be taken immediately. Here, once again, the utter sovereignty of God over the affairs of mankind is asserted.

The selection of Isaiah 29 for the *haftarah* is because of v. 8, which describes a man dreaming as though he were eating, but awakens hungry, or of drinking, but awakens thirsty. This represents Jerusalem, symbolically called “Ariel” (אַרְיֵאל), which is often taken to mean “lion of God.” But in this case, Isaiah may be using the term even as Ezekiel would use it in 43:15–16 as a name for the altar of sacrifice. This designation may actually be from אָרָה, “to burn” and אֵל, “God,” and thus mean “God’s hearth,” or the place where sacrifice is made to God. Indeed, Isaiah identifies Adonai as He “whose fire is in Zion and whose furnace is in Jerusalem” (Is 31:9). Thus, according to Isaiah, the siege of Jerusalem would take no longer than a year—one complete cycle of festivals (cf 32:10). And thus the Temple itself would be ransacked and the altar destroyed.

The *haftarah* also parallels our *parashah* in v. 11, which describes a sealed prophecy which even the literate cannot interpret, much like the inability of the magicians to interpret Pharaoh's dreams. But why are the prophets and seers (v. 10) unable to understand the clear message of God? "Because this people draw near with their words and honor Me with their lip service, but they remove their hearts far from Me, and their reverence for Me consists of tradition learned" (v. 12). There is nothing essentially wrong with tradition, until it becomes an end in itself. Tradition ought rather to be a means of maintaining and enhancing one's heart relationship to God. When tradition fails to do this, it has lost its purpose.

Yet Isaiah's message in our *haftarah* ends with God's firm commitment to the salvation and preservation of His people Israel. Here is yet another tie-in to our Torah portion, for in the same way that Adonai preserved the family of Jacob, putting Joseph in a position of power in Egypt, so He has set Himself to maintain His chosen people and to bring them to their promised rest. Thus, the nations that war against Jerusalem will be overcome by God's almighty arm, and once again, He will restore His people, and bring them back to Himself. "But when he sees his children, the work of My hands, in his midst, they will sanctify My name; Indeed, they will sanctify the Holy One of Jacob and will stand in awe of the God of Israel" (v. 23). God's faithfulness to Israel will be seen when, against all odds, He renews within them a heart of faith and writes the Torah upon their heart (Jer 31:31–34).

This leads us to the connection of our Apostolic portion. There, in Revelation 7, the 144,000 (12,000 from each of the tribes) are assembled, and before the destruction could come upon the earth, "all the tribes of Israel" (v. 4) are sealed with a mark on the forehead (is there a subtle parallel to Cain?), in order that they should not be harmed by the angels who would bring devastation. The overarching intent of John's vision at this point is precisely what Isaiah has prophesied: God would protect His people and save them.

Curiously, the tribe of Dan is missing in the list, and apparently the tribe of Joseph stands for Ephraim. Commentators and teachers have labored hard and long to come up with some explanation why Dan would be missing. Some have suggested that Dan was not sealed because they had introduced idolatry into Israel (Lev 24:10–16), and later both Dan and Ephraim were instrumental in bringing in idolatry (Judges 18:2, 30–31). Yet surely one cannot consider that the tribe of Dan is abandoned by God, for Ezekiel prophesies Dan's inheritance in the Land during the millennial reign of Messiah (Ezek 48:1–2).

Others have suggested that the listing of the tribes in Rev 7 are meant to convey a "spiritual Israel" as over against the physical descendants of Jacob. They point to the fact that the order in which the tribes are listed does not conform to any listing found elsewhere, and that Dan and Ephraim are both unnamed. Such oddities are considered cryptic signals to alert the reader to a different meaning. But this kind of replacement theology cannot stand in the face of the unified witness of Scripture.

More than likely, John wanted to include both Levi and Joseph in his list, and therefore expected his readers to understand that Dan was included in the company of Asher and Naphtali (cf. Num 2:9–31) and that Ephraim is represented by Joseph. But why would John want to emphasize Levi and Joseph? We should remember that just two chapters earlier in the Apocalypse, the reigning Messiah is seen as a Lamb who had been slaughtered but who nonetheless lived and reigned. Levi is symbolic of the sacrificial system, for the priests who came from Levi attended the altar. And Joseph is the suffering Messiah, who was left for dead, but returns as the savior of his people,

and of the known world of his time.

But to the company of Israel, represented by the 144,000, is added a multitude of people from every “nation, tribe, people and language,” standing before the throne, clothed in white robes, and they held palm branches in their hands. This is the picture of sukkot, in which the lulav is waved as a reminder that God would bring His people from every point of the compass, and gather them to dwell with Him. This is John’s picture of the final victory—the salvation of God’s family, composed of “all Israel” (cf. Rom 11:26) and those chosen from the nations to join her. All surround the throne, and all praise the Lamb crying “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.” This likewise fits the sukkot festival, in which the “Great Hoshanah” (*Hoshanah Rabbah*, “save us”) is recited on the seventh day. Here, on what constitutes the eighth day (*Shemini Atzeret*, a picture of the eternal reign of Messiah with His people), the people of God confess that they have, indeed, been saved by God’s almighty hand!

So our *parashah* gives to us, in the story of Joseph, a glimpse of the “whole picture,” the salvation that God brings about for His people. The question that confronts us, of course, is whether we will be willing fully to commit ourselves in faith to the God Who has promised to save and keep us. Can we, like Joseph, maintain our fervent faith in God’s goodness, in spite of the trials in which we may find ourselves? May we cling to His promises, knowing that He is faithful, and that He, by the grace given to us in Messiah Yeshua, will bring us safely into His very presence, to dwell with Him forever. For along our journey, He is with us, just as He was with Joseph, ever assuring us that we are His, and that He is our Savior.