

JOSEPH: A BIBLICAL APPROACH TO DREAM INTERPRETATION

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GOALS AND OVERVIEW

The goal of this paper is to present the innovative methods of dream interpretation introduced by Joseph. In the Bible, dreams of special significance, understood to be messages from God, are generally experienced by prophets or kings. Many biblical dreams are explicitly stated as being communications from God or use symbols that imply their divine origin, such as angels. Neither of these characteristics applies to the dreams of Joseph. Joseph, although in many ways a typical immature teenager with ordinary dreams reflecting typical teenage insecurities, attained greatness, leadership, and the capacity for national and historic influence by treating his seemingly ordinary dreams as prophetic. The methods Joseph used are operationally definable and can be implemented by any person.

The Bible treats all dreams seriously. However, the Bible employs two types of seriousness when approaching dream interpretation. The Bible interprets dreams of prophets and kings¹ as well as dreams with divine symbols as indicating long-term communal and spiritual events. In contrast, dreams without divine symbols that occur to ordinary people, deal with immediate personal matters. Throughout this paper, the word personal indicates a dream interpretation focusing on the social or physical needs of the dreamer.

Some examples of dreams of prophets or kings or dreams with divine symbols that are interpreted as indicating long-term communal events include Pharaoh's dreams which Joseph describes as *what God is about to do He has told to Pharaoh* (Gen. 41:25), the child Samuel's dream which is explicitly described as a visitation by God (I Sam. 3:4-10), the numerous prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and King Nebuchadnezzar's dreams which Daniel describes as coming from God (Dan. 2:28).

Dreams without divine symbols to ordinary people who were neither prophets nor kings were interpreted as dealing with immediate personal matters, as we find in the case of the dreams of Pharaoh's chief baker and cup-

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bearer, dreams that mirrored concerns about their immediate future while in prison.²

Regarding the dream warning Laban to treat Jacob nicely (Gen. 31:24), the text explicitly states that *God had come to Laban the Aramean in a dream by night*. However, Laban was not a prophet and did not interpret his dream as indicating long-term communal goals, but rather as dealing with immediate personal matters, a warning not to hurt Jacob lest he come to harm.

The dreams of Joseph differ significantly from other dreams in the Bible. They are not perceived prophetically – that is, the Bible does not begin Joseph's dreams with "God appeared to Joseph" or "An angel said to Joseph." Furthermore, no angel or divine symbol is found in Joseph's dreams. Most importantly, the biblical narrative itself does not interpret Joseph's dreams, at the time he dreamt them, as indicating long-term communal matters. Rather, the Bible cites Joseph's brothers' interpretation of Joseph's dreams as personal wishes and fantasies, not as coming from God.

THE BROTHERS' PERSONAL INTERPRETATIONS OF JOSEPH'S DREAMS

Joseph's dreams in contrast to all other biblical dreams are the only ones not taken seriously. His brothers angrily snap at him: *Are you really going to rule over us* (Gen. 37:8). Joseph's father, a Patriarch, also belittles his dreams: *Do you think I, your mother and brothers will come to bow to you* (Gen. 37:10). The brothers' anger at Joseph's ambitions prompts them to the decision: *And now let us kill him . . . and let us see what will become of his dream* (Gen. 37:20). Clearly, the brothers regarded Joseph's dreams as purely personal fantasies dealing with his own inner world.

Let us now study the symbolic interpretation of Joseph's dreams according to his brothers. In studying Joseph's two dreams, one key activity is *bowing* (Gen. 37:7,9). Joseph's brothers explicitly interpret *bowing* personally, indicating Joseph's desire to *rule over us* (Gen. 37:8). Joseph's first dream, a dream of erect objects, may also symbolically express a quest for physical maturity. Although this interpretation is not mentioned at the time of the dream, there are several verses hinting or pointing to such an interpretation. Joseph is described as a 17 year old who behaved like an immature child, who enjoyed telling on his siblings (Gen. 37:2). Furthermore, Reuben, who did not share the brothers' goals of killing or selling Joseph, defends Joseph

by calling him *a child* (Gen. 42:22), the intent being that Joseph could grow up (from childhood) the way other teenagers grow up and upon discovering his individual masculine identity would no longer want power. Rashi (Gen. 37:2), based on the midrash, adds that Joseph was overly concerned with his looks. This may be hinted at in the biblical text, which stresses that Joseph was very good looking (Gen. 39:6) and the fact that Joseph's father, on his deathbed, explicitly blesses Joseph that he should achieve masculine attractiveness (Gen. 49:22), which implies that this was a concern of Joseph.³

Joseph's two dreams indicating a quest for power and physical maturity present immediate personal preoccupations normal for insecure teenagers. These symbolic interpretations are justified by common psychological sense as well as the biblical clues mentioned above.

JOSEPH'S DREAM INTERPRETATION METHODS: COMMUNAL VS. PERSONAL

Joseph interpreted his ordinary dreams using prophetic methods. The idea that prophetic messages are given for the benefit of the community is found in several places in the Bible, for example *For I make known to him [what will happen], that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment; that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which he has spoken of him* (Gen. 18:19). Rashi on Deuteronomy 2:16-17, *So it came to pass, when all the men of war had perished and died from among the people, That the Lord spoke to me, saying*, comments that "Moses had no prophecy while the men of war were dying but did have prophecy after their deaths because prophecy was only given to Moses for the sake of the community." Joseph applied this approach to his dreams, understanding that they indicated something concerning the community.

The communal-service aspect of Joseph's understanding of his divine mission is indicated in several verses such as:

Now therefore be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that you sold me here; for God did send me before you to preserve life. For these two years has the famine been in the land; and yet there are five years, when there shall neither be plowing nor harvest. And God sent me before you to preserve you for posterity in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So now it was not you who sent me

here, but God; and he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and a ruler throughout all the land of Egypt (Gen. 45:5-8).

And Joseph said to them, Fear not; for am I in the place of God? But as for you, you thought evil against me; but God meant it to good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive. Now therefore do not fear; I will nourish you, and your little ones. And he comforted them, and spoke kindly to them (Gen. 50:19-21).

If Joseph understood his dreams as indicating that he would have a special role in saving his family, what could the bowing in his dreams mean? The Bible interprets the act of bowing in four distinct ways. Bowing can indicate (a) thanks (e.g. Gen. 24:26,48,52), (b) acknowledgement of power (e.g. Gen. 33:3, Gen. 49:8), (c) worship (e.g. Ex. 20:5) and (d) greeting (e.g. Ex. 18:7, Gen. 18:2, Gen. 19:1). Joseph interpreted the bowing in his dreams as symbolically indicating thanks; he would help his family who would bow in thanks. In contrast, his brothers interpreted the bowing in terms of power. We see here the first hint of controversy regarding the method of interpreting ordinary dreams: Joseph's brothers interpreted the dream as a quest for personal power, while Joseph interpreted the dream as an expression of thanks for his helpful behavior towards the community. This explains why Joseph was eager to share his dreams with his brothers, thinking that these dreams indicated that he would help them all succeed.

LONG-TERM IMPLEMENTATION VS. IMMEDIATE IMPLEMENTATION

Personal dreams, such as the dreams of the master baker (Gen. 40:9-13), chief cup-bearer (Gen. 40:16-19), or Laban (Gen. 31:24), deal with immediate near-term issues. In contrast, prophetic dreams, delivered by God, often have long term implications.

The difference between an immediate and long-term approach is illustrated in Moses' mission to free the Jews. God had sent Moses to free the Jews from

Egypt. Moses goes to Pharaoh and demands the freedom of the Jews only to find Pharaoh angry and giving the Jews more work. Such delays and snags in prophecies are normal. Yet Moses complains to God about lack of immediate

implementation (Ex. 5:22-23). Rashi interprets God's response, Exodus 6:1-3, as emphasizing that experienced prophets expect implementation to be long term. Rashi notes that the prophecies of the Patriarchs were not realized in their lifetime. This includes the prophecy to Abraham to give him the land of Israel (Gen. 17:1-8) and the prophecy to Jacob to make him fruitful and a great nation (Gen. 35:11).

As Rashi there points out, Abraham actually suffered from delayed implementation of prophetic promises. Immediately after God promised Abraham the land of Israel (Gen. 12:7) there is a famine and Abraham must leave Israel and go to Egypt (Gen. 12:10). Rashi (Gen. 13:7) interprets the conflict between Abraham and his nephew Lot as a disagreement on the implementation of prophecy: Lot held that since Abraham had been promised Israel, therefore the land already belonged to him and it wasn't theft to let his sheep graze in local pastures belonging to others. In contrast, Abraham stood fast to prophetic standards; prophecy takes time to implement. The prophecy has a non-implemented status until it is fulfilled.

Joseph applied this prophetic approach to his own dream, expecting it would take a considerable amount of time to come true. Joseph utilized the expected long-term implementation of his dream to prepare himself for a leadership role. It is a mistake to perceive Joseph as suddenly appointed to Egyptian viceroy after being in prison.⁴ Rather, Joseph had two senior appointments prior to his becoming viceroy of Egypt: master slave in Potiphar's house (Gen. 39:2-5) as well as senior ward in the prison (Gen. 39:21-23). These appointments enriched him with necessary skills and leadership qualities.⁵

The Bible itself is silent on both the brothers' and Joseph's interpretation of the erect sheaves. Earlier we suggested that the brothers interpreted the erectness physically, a desire for attainment of physical maturity. Genesis Rabbah (84:9-10) presents Joseph's symbolic interpretation: "Joseph dreamt that his gathering of grain would 'stand' and 'survive' (symbolized by erectness) while other attempts at gathering grain would fail." The midrash interprets the sheaf dream prophetically, an indication of future events that would happen in many years. Note that the Bible never calls Joseph a prophet. Furthermore, unlike every other prophet, the Bible does not record for Joseph any visions with divine communications or symbols. We therefore understand this mid-

rash as describing a prophetic treatment of an ordinary personal dream, understanding it as a long term prophecy that affects the community.

NON-SEXUAL INTERPRETATION OF DREAMS

Scholars, both religious and secular, marvel at the blatant contrast between the Bible and other religions: in other religions, the religious rites as well as stories describing the origin of the world have a distinct sexual component. In contrast, a sexual component of prophecies, deities and religious rites is glaringly absent in the Bible. The biblical conception of a Temple and the biblical prophecies avoid sexual components.⁶

Joseph applied this spiritual insight to his dreams. Joseph had every right to interpret his upright sheaf dream physically. Had he done so he would have violated no moral imperative, after all, this dream was not described as a divine communication. Yet Joseph did not do so. Joseph took a seemingly ordinary dream with ordinary physical content and treated this dream as if it were prophetic, giving it a meaning of spiritual content.

NON-TRANSPARENCY OF DREAMS

Prophetic dreams are frequently non-transparent not only in development but also in content. This means that the referents of the dream objects are not immediately known. Rather, the meaning eventually becomes clear.

For example, the prophecy of the covenant of halves (Gen. 15:13) states that the Jews will be slaves in a land not belonging to them, but the identity of the land is not clear at the time of the prophecy. Only later is Egypt identified as the land enslaving the Jews. This non-transparency is consistent with the doctrine of free will since God did not decree that any specific land would enslave and torment the Jews.

Similarly, the Bible does not identify the identity of the four terrible beasts (Dan. 7:3). Although later commentators have tried to identify them based on historical episodes, the book explicitly states that the prophecy is unknown until the end (Dan. 12:9). Here we would again invoke the important doctrine of free will – God would never *decree* the performance of such evil on any nation – rather the nation must choose to do evil.

Echoes of the non-immediate transparency of prophetic content also occur in the Binding of Isaac. Abraham is not told directly where to sacrifice Isaac.

The command to *raise him for an elevation offering on one of the mountains that I will show you* (Gen. 22:2) is non-transparent, the identity of the mountain, and even the elevation offering, would only be found out days later.

Using this idea of non-transparency I would suggest that while the *bowing* in Joseph's dreams indicated to him a future benevolent leadership role, nevertheless, at the time of the dream, Joseph is unaware where he would rule, how he would rule, and how he would help his brothers. Pharaoh's famine/satiety dreams reflected back to Joseph's sheaf dream which now took on a transparent meaning – Joseph would succeed at gathering grain while others would fail.

CONCLUSION

Joseph's dreams are an important part of Genesis. Roughly 25% of Genesis, the last 13 of its 50 chapters, presents Joseph's ordinary dreams as dynamically transforming human personality, the community, and ultimately human history. Why does the Bible, replete with important prophetic dreams dealing with long-term communal matters, and why does Genesis, filled with important historical prophecies, devote a significant amount of time to the personal dreams of an immature teenager? To teach us that those personal dreams dealing with social or even with physical needs can be treated with prophetic methods. Joseph's dreams, ordinary developmental dreams for teenagers, when properly treated with prophetic methods, led to the reestablishment of the Jewish national destiny. This dream interpretation method is based on a) communal service, b) a long-term approach, c) non-sexual interpretation, and d) the non-transparency of dream content. We believe the ideas presented in this paper have applicability in a wide variety of outreach, psychological, therapeutic and growth programs in a modern setting and would advocate the use of dreams in outreach and developmental work.

NOTES:

1. For example, Genesis Rabbah 89:4, commenting on the biblical passage, *And Pharaoh was dreaming* (Gen. 41:1), states "Is Pharaoh the only person who dreamed? But because he was a king his dreams had special significance for the world." This midrash alerts us to the biblical point of view that the dreams of kings, like the dreams of prophets, have special significance.
2. Joseph states that *dream interpretations belong to God* (Gen. 40:8). However, the dream in-

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tation he gave to the chief baker and chief cup-bearer dealt with immediate personal matters, whether they would be freed or executed. One could further argue that these two dreams were not perceived as prophetic but rather as confessional. The chief baker probably knew he was negligent in his duties and expected Pharaoh's investigation to bear this out which would result in his execution. Similarly the chief cup-bearer knew that he was diligent and that any mishaps were true accidents beyond his control. He expected that an investigation by Pharaoh would vindicate him and he would be freed.

3. Here Rashi is consistent with the simple meaning of the words of the text ". . . *girls tip toe over the walls* (to see him)." Rashi explicitly rejects the midrashic interpretations of the text as inconsistent with its simple meaning.

4. See e.g. the Song of Songs Rabbah 1:1 which applies Proverbs 22:29 to Joseph: "Because Joseph was diligent in his work as slave therefore he merited to stand before Pharaoh the King." We interpret this midrash broadly as indicating that Joseph's standing before Pharaoh was reflective of managerial work done as a slave and in prison.

5. Another example of the intrinsic nature of the long-term implementation of dreams is indicated in Rashi (Gen. 41:48). Rashi suggests that preservation of food required certain preservatives inherent in local soil. This could easily have been learned by Joseph during his slave days when he was in charge of Potiphar's house. Here we see Joseph's slavery as an "appointment" which prepared him with necessary skills to become viceroy.

6. See Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel – From its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, Translated and Abridged by Moshe Greenberg, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), pp. 60-66, where he discusses the absence of theogony in the Bible. Also see Tikvah Frymer-Kensky, *Studies in Bible and Feminist Criticism* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2006), pp. 240-231. Dr. Frymer-Kensky broadens the idea of lack of sexuality in prophecy to include lack of sexuality in all services of holiness. A typical statement is, "Any sexuality was to be kept so far from Temple service that even the wages of a prostitute were not to be given to a temple as a gift." Finally I should mention the general fact that the various biblical prophecies and their symbols, for example, the almond vision (Jeremiah 1), are never interpreted sexually but rather as dealing with moral, social and religious issues.