

JOSEPH – THE DREAM INTERPRETER  
Gn 40-41

**PRAYER**

Wisdom says: Mine are counsel and advice; Mine is strength; I am understanding. <sup>15</sup> By me kings reign, and lawgivers establish justice; <sup>16</sup> By me princes govern, and nobles; all the rulers of earth. <sup>17</sup> "Those who love me I also love, and those who seek me find me. <sup>18</sup> With me are riches and honor, enduring wealth and prosperity. <sup>19</sup> My fruit is better than gold, yes, than pure gold, and my revenue than choice silver. <sup>20</sup> On the way of duty I walk, along the paths of justice, <sup>21</sup> Granting wealth to those who love me, and filling their treasuries.

/Prov 8,14-21/

**INTRODUCTION**

People in our world want to win and be in first place. They have a hard time accepting losses, being at a disadvantage or being in last place. Still, these are the situations where God is at work. But only an attentive person can understand that. Such a person is given the gift of wisdom: not only for understanding, but also to better manage his tasks. Joseph in Egypt, as prisoner and last, points to God's presence and is a wise administrator of the goods entrusted to him for the benefit of others.

**TEXT**

Some time afterward, the royal cupbearer and baker gave offense to their lord, the king of Egypt. <sup>2</sup> Pharaoh was angry with his two courtiers, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker, <sup>3</sup> and he put them in custody in the house of the chief steward (the same jail where Joseph was confined). <sup>4</sup> The chief steward assigned Joseph to them, and he became their attendant. After they had been in custody for some time, <sup>5</sup> the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt who were confined in the jail both had dreams on the same night, each dream with its own meaning. <sup>6</sup> When Joseph came to them in the morning, he noticed that they looked disturbed. <sup>7</sup> So he asked Pharaoh's courtiers who were with him in custody in his master's house, "Why do you look so sad today?" <sup>8</sup> They answered him, "We have had dreams, but there is no one to interpret them for us." Joseph said to them, "Surely, interpretations come from God. Please tell the dreams to me."

<sup>9</sup> Then the chief cupbearer told Joseph his dream. "In my dream," he said, "I saw a vine in front of me, <sup>10</sup> and on the vine were three branches. It had barely budded when its blossoms came out, and its clusters ripened into grapes. <sup>11</sup> Pharaoh's cup was in my hand; so I took the grapes, pressed them out into his cup, and put it in Pharaoh's hand." <sup>12</sup> Joseph said to him: "This is what it means. The three branches are three days; <sup>13</sup> within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your post. You will be handing Pharaoh his cup as you formerly used to do when you were his cupbearer. <sup>14</sup> So if you will still remember, when all is well with you, that I was here with you, please do me the favor of mentioning me to Pharaoh, to get me out of this place. <sup>15</sup> The truth is that I was kidnapped from the land of the Hebrews, and here I have not done anything for which I should have been put into a dungeon."

<sup>16</sup> When the chief baker saw that Joseph had given this favorable interpretation, he said to him: "I too had a dream. In it I had three wicker baskets on my head; <sup>17</sup> in the top one were all kinds of bakery products for Pharaoh, but the birds were pecking at them out of the basket on my head." <sup>18</sup> Joseph said to him in reply: "This is what it means. The three baskets are three days; <sup>19</sup> within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and have you impaled on a stake, and the birds will be pecking the flesh from your body."

<sup>20</sup> And in fact, on the third day, which was Pharaoh's birthday, when he gave a banquet to all his staff, with his courtiers around him, he lifted up the heads of the chief cupbearer and chief baker. <sup>21</sup> He restored the chief cupbearer to his office, so that he again handed the cup to Pharaoh; <sup>22</sup> but the chief baker he impaled-- just as Joseph had told them in his interpretation. <sup>23</sup> Yet the chief cupbearer gave no thought to Joseph; he had forgotten him.

**Genesis 41:1** After a lapse of two years, Pharaoh had a dream. He saw himself standing by the Nile, <sup>2</sup> when up out of the Nile came seven cows, handsome and fat; they grazed in the reed grass. <sup>3</sup> Behind them seven other cows, ugly and gaunt, came up out of the Nile; and standing on the bank of the Nile beside the others, <sup>4</sup> the ugly, gaunt cows ate up the seven handsome, fat cows. Then Pharaoh woke up.

<sup>5</sup> He fell asleep again and had another dream. He saw seven ears of grain, fat and healthy, growing on a single stalk. <sup>6</sup> Behind them sprouted seven ears of grain, thin and blasted by the east wind; <sup>7</sup> and the seven thin ears swallowed up the seven fat, healthy ears. Then Pharaoh woke up, to find it was only a dream.

<sup>8</sup> Next morning his spirit was agitated. So he summoned all the magicians and sages of Egypt and recounted his dreams to them; but no one could interpret his dreams for him. <sup>9</sup> Then the chief cupbearer spoke up and said to Pharaoh: "On this occasion I am reminded of my negligence. <sup>10</sup> Once, when Pharaoh was angry, he put me and the chief baker in custody in the house of the chief steward. <sup>11</sup> Later, we both had dreams on the same night, and each of our dreams had its own meaning. <sup>12</sup> There with us was a Hebrew youth, a slave of the chief steward; and when we told him our dreams, he interpreted them for us and explained for each of us the meaning of his dream. <sup>13</sup> And it turned out just as he had told us: I was restored to my post, but the other man was impaled."

<sup>14</sup> Pharaoh therefore had Joseph summoned, and they hurriedly brought him from the dungeon. After he shaved and changed his clothes, he came into Pharaoh's presence. <sup>15</sup> Pharaoh then said to him: "I had certain dreams that no one can interpret. But I hear it said of you that the moment you are told a dream you can interpret it." <sup>16</sup> "It is not I," Joseph replied to Pharaoh, "but God who will give Pharaoh the right answer." <sup>17</sup> Then Pharaoh said to Joseph: "In my dream, I was standing on the bank of the Nile, <sup>18</sup> when up from the Nile came seven cows, fat and well-formed; they grazed in the reed grass. <sup>19</sup> Behind them came seven other cows, scrawny, most ill-formed and gaunt. Never have I seen such ugly specimens as these in all the land of Egypt! <sup>20</sup> The gaunt, ugly cows ate up the first seven fat cows. <sup>21</sup> But when they had consumed them, no one could tell that they had done so, because they looked as ugly as before. Then I woke up. <sup>22</sup> In another dream I saw seven ears of grain, fat and healthy, growing on a single stalk. <sup>23</sup> Behind them sprouted seven ears of grain, shriveled and thin and blasted by the east wind; <sup>24</sup> and the seven thin ears swallowed up the seven healthy ears. I have spoken to the magicians, but none of them can give me an explanation." <sup>25</sup> Joseph said to Pharaoh: "Both of Pharaoh's dreams have the same meaning. God has thus foretold to Pharaoh what he is about to do. <sup>26</sup> The seven healthy cows are seven years, and the seven healthy ears are seven years-- the same in each dream. <sup>27</sup> So also, the seven thin, ugly cows that came up after them are seven years, as are the seven thin, wind-blasted ears; they are seven years of famine. <sup>28</sup> It is just as I told Pharaoh: God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do. <sup>29</sup> Seven years of great abundance are now coming throughout the land of Egypt; <sup>30</sup> but these will be followed by seven years of famine, when all the abundance in the land of Egypt will be forgotten. When the famine has ravaged the land, <sup>31</sup> no trace of the abundance will be found in the land because of the famine that follows it-- so utterly severe will that famine be. <sup>32</sup> That Pharaoh had the same dream twice means that the matter has been reaffirmed by God and that God will soon bring it about. <sup>33</sup> "Therefore, let Pharaoh seek out a wise and discerning man and put him in charge of the land of Egypt. <sup>34</sup> Pharaoh should also take action to appoint overseers, so as to regiment the land during the seven years of abundance. <sup>35</sup> They should husband all the food of the coming good years, collecting the grain under Pharaoh's authority, to be stored in the towns for food. <sup>36</sup> This food will serve as a reserve for the country against the seven years of famine that are to follow in the land of Egypt, so that the land may not perish in the famine." <sup>37</sup> This advice pleased Pharaoh and all his officials. <sup>38</sup> "Could we find another like him," Pharaoh asked his officials, "a man so endowed with the spirit of God?" <sup>39</sup> So Pharaoh said to Joseph: "Since God has made all this known to you, no one can be as wise and discerning as you are. <sup>40</sup> You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people shall dart at your command. Only in respect to the throne shall I outrank you. <sup>41</sup> Herewith," Pharaoh told Joseph, "I place you in charge of the whole land of Egypt." <sup>42</sup> With that, Pharaoh took off his signet ring and put it on Joseph's finger. He had him dressed in robes of fine linen and put a gold chain about his neck. <sup>43</sup> He then had him ride in the chariot of his vizier, and they shouted "Abrek!" before him. Thus was Joseph installed over the whole land of Egypt. <sup>44</sup> "I, Pharaoh, proclaim," he told Joseph, "that without your approval no one shall move hand or foot in all the land of Egypt." <sup>45</sup> Pharaoh also bestowed the name of Zaphnath-paneah on Joseph, and he gave him in marriage Asenath, the daughter of Potiphera, priest of Heliopolis. <sup>46</sup> Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh, king of Egypt. After Joseph left Pharaoh's presence, he traveled throughout the land of Egypt.

<sup>47</sup> During the seven years of plenty, when the land produced abundant crops, <sup>48</sup> he husbanded all the food of these years of plenty that the land of Egypt was enjoying and stored it in the towns, placing in each town the crops of the fields around it. <sup>49</sup> Joseph garnered grain in quantities like the sands of the sea, so vast that at last he stopped measuring it, for it was beyond measure. <sup>50</sup> Before the famine years

set in, Joseph became the father of two sons, borne to him by Asenath, daughter of Potiphara, priest of Heliopolis.<sup>51</sup> He named his first-born Manasseh, meaning, "God has made me forget entirely the sufferings I endured at the hands of my family";<sup>52</sup> and the second he named Ephraim, meaning, "God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction."

<sup>53</sup> When the seven years of abundance enjoyed by the land of Egypt came to an end, <sup>54</sup> the seven years of famine set in, just as Joseph had predicted. Although there was famine in all the other countries, food was available throughout the land of Egypt. <sup>55</sup> When hunger came to be felt throughout the land of Egypt and the people cried to Pharaoh for bread, Pharaoh directed all the Egyptians to go to Joseph and do whatever he told them. <sup>56</sup> When the famine had spread throughout the land, Joseph opened all the cities that had grain and rationed it to the Egyptians, since the famine had gripped the land of Egypt. <sup>57</sup> In fact, all the world came to Joseph to obtain rations of grain, for famine had gripped the whole world.

## STRUCTURE

Our long episode is well integrated in Joseph's story. After being hated by his brothers and sold to Egypt, Joseph is at the lowest point in his life: he lost trust of his master and was put into prison. And then there is a turning point, like several times in the lives of the patriarchs. Joseph becomes the ruler of Egypt who makes life and death decisions. Later on, his brothers will come and bow in front of him, thus fulfilling his two previous dreams.

There are two pairs of dreams here which provide general structure. The first one is in Gen 41:

Introduction	40, 1-8
Dream 1 (cupbearer)	40, 9-15
Dream 2 (chief baker)	40, 16-19
Conclusion	40, 20-23

Chapter 41 is a continuation of the story: it is the third advancement in service: in Gn 39 he enjoys favor with Potiphar and later is cast into prison. In Gn 40 he becomes confidant to the royal baker and cupbearer but is forgotten. Now he has advanced and, for the 3<sup>rd</sup> time, becomes the lord of Egypt. He is distributing food in anticipation for the moment when his brothers will come to get food.

The chapter has the following structure:

- I. Dreams (1-7) two dreams reported
- II. Interpretation
  - a. (8-13) interpreters fail to explain dreams
  - b. (14-46) Joseph and Pharaoh (Joseph is summoned; explains the dreams; is appointed);
- III. Fulfillment
  - a. (47-52) Joseph's work in years of plenty
  - b. (53-57) Joseph's work in famine

This narration is well integrated into Joseph's general story and there are several parallels. We will see them in the more detailed discussion that follows:

## LECTIO

**1-4. Some time afterward, the royal cupbearer and baker gave offense to their lord, the king of Egypt.** <sup>2</sup> Pharaoh was angry with his two courtiers, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker, <sup>3</sup> and

he put them in custody in the house of the chief steward (the same jail where Joseph was confined). <sup>4</sup> The chief steward assigned Joseph to them, and he became their attendant. After they had been in custody for some time,

These verses provide a larger setting for our discussion (dreams and their interpretation). It has to be read in the light of the previous statement: “the LORD remained with Joseph; he showed him kindness by making the chief jailer well-disposed toward him” (39,21). We don’t know much about Joseph’s stay in prison but the time he spent there was 13 years (37,2; 41,46).

Cupbearer and baker are more than waiters – they were high officials, who in many cases became favorites of the king (*it was a confidential function, since the kings were afraid of being poisoned*) and they might have had a strong political influence. Their sin (offence) mentioned in the text stands in contrast with Joseph’s being innocent. Joseph makes a career even while in prison and raises to the top palace-officials, as he did in Potiphar’s household: “he took a liking to Joseph and made him his personal attendant; he put him in charge of his household and entrusted to him all his possessions” (39,4). Later it becomes clear, how history is repeated and Joseph will be forgotten.

**5-8. the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt who were confined in the jail both had dreams on the same night, each dream with its own meaning. <sup>6</sup> When Joseph came to them in the morning, he noticed that they looked disturbed. <sup>7</sup> So he asked Pharaoh’s courtiers who were with him in custody in his master’s house, “Why do you look so sad today?” <sup>8</sup> They answered him, “We have had dreams, but there is no one to interpret them for us.” Joseph said to them, “Surely, interpretations come from God. Please tell the dreams to me.”**

After the general setting, the central episode with dreams and their interpretation follows. The two dreams are closely related and serve the same purpose. We might think about the two dreams of Joseph foretelling when he was living with his family in Canaan. Even those dreams were foretelling the future. Joseph’s empathy brings the pharaoh’s servants to open their hearts to him which, in turn, leads to his release and promotion in the Egyptian court.

Why were they so puzzled by their dreams? There was a strong belief in antiquity that sleep puts people in direct contact with the other world (world of dead and gods). The interpretation of dreams was a complex science entrusted to experts only (= liberation of meaning, message contained in the dream, text...). Being in prison, they have no access to such expertise and as prisoners they were very concerned about knowing their fate and future.

Joseph makes a simple statement only: “interpretations come from God”. Later he will make the same point to the pharaoh “It is not I but God who will give Pharaoh the right answer” (41,16). The OT in general rejected the occult practices (Dt 18,10-22) and Joseph makes it clear that it is not through magical means, or professional education, but it is God who grants understanding. The events of the future lay in the Lord’s hand only.

**9-15. Then the chief cupbearer told Joseph his dream. “In my dream,” he said, “I saw a vine in front of me, <sup>10</sup> and on the vine were three branches. It had barely budded when its blossoms came out, and its clusters ripened into grapes. <sup>11</sup> Pharaoh’s cup was in my hand; so I took the grapes, pressed them out into his cup, and put it in Pharaoh’s hand.” <sup>12</sup> Joseph said to him: “This is what it means. The three branches are three days; <sup>13</sup> within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your post. You will be handing Pharaoh his cup as you formerly used to do when you were his cupbearer. <sup>14</sup> So if you will still remember, when all is well with you, that I was here with you, please do me the favor of mentioning me to Pharaoh, to get me out of this place. <sup>15</sup> The truth is that I was kidnaped from the land of the Hebrews, and here I have not done anything for which I should have been put into a dungeon.”**

First is the cupbearer's dream and it is narrated in greater detail. The dream is dominated by "threes". The interpretation is positive and Pharaoh will lift the cupbearer's head, which, in this instance, means "to deal kindly with". The same expression will have a different meaning in the parallel dream in v. 19, where the baker's head will be lifted from him as a sign of his execution.

Patristic commentary: Ambrose elaborates on the contrast between human power and God's mysteries. Joseph represents Christ who illuminates reality and enlightens it with His divinity.

Joseph also presents a plea for himself: "So if you will still remember, when all is well with you, that I was here with you, please do me the favor of mentioning me to Pharaoh, to get me out of this place". The phraseology used here is more common for divine, rather than human actions: God remembers: "God remembered Noah and all the animals, with him in the ark." (8,1); Isaac prays to God: "LORD, God of my master Abraham, let it turn out favorably for me today" (24,12); God brings out: I, the LORD, am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that place of slavery" (Ex 20,2). His plea seems to foreshadow the final liberation of the Israelites from the slavery of Egypt.

Patristic commentary: Joseph doesn't point out his brothers' fault, nor Potiphar's wife's fault. His request that the cupbearer might intercede for him is a sign of humility.

Rabbinic commentary: his request is a sign of a lack of confidence in God.

**16-19.** <sup>16</sup> When the chief baker saw that Joseph had given this favorable interpretation, he said to him: "I too had a dream. In it I had three wicker baskets on my head; <sup>17</sup> in the top one were all kinds of bakery products for Pharaoh, but the birds were pecking at them out of the basket on my head." <sup>18</sup> Joseph said to him in reply: "This is what it means. The three baskets are three days; <sup>19</sup> within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and have you impaled on a stake, and the birds will be pecking the flesh from your body."

Now the second dream follows and its interpretation is given by Joseph. We don't know exactly what type of bakery products might have been in the basket, but the Egyptian dictionary lists 38 kinds of cakes and 57 varieties of bread. These facts show that the Egyptians were true gourmets and also stress the importance of the chief baker and his function in the court.

The main "actors/characters" in the dream are the birds, while the baker is passive (compared to the activity of the cupbearer). The way Joseph describes his death (postponing until the last possible moment) is with an execution followed by exposure. This treatment was intended to prevent his spirit from having rest in the afterlife.

**20-22.** <sup>20</sup> And in fact, on the third day, which was Pharaoh's birthday, when he gave a banquet to all his staff, with his courtiers around him, he lifted up the heads of the chief cupbearer and chief baker. <sup>21</sup> He restored the chief cupbearer to his office, so that he again handed the cup to Pharaoh; <sup>22</sup> but the chief baker he impaled-- just as Joseph had told them in his interpretation. <sup>23</sup> Yet the chief cupbearer gave no thought to Joseph; he had forgotten him.

Joseph's predicaments about the cupbearer's and baker's fate are repeated very closely here indicating that it was God who inspired Joseph: "interpretations come from God" (8) and "the LORD remained with Joseph" (39,21).

(v. 13) "within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your post. You will be handing Pharaoh his cup"; "within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and have you impaled on a stake" → "on the third day... he lifted up the heads of the chief cupbearer and chief baker. <sup>21</sup> He restored the chief cupbearer to his office, so that he again handed the cup to Pharaoh".

23. At the end, Joseph is left in a situation similar to the previous time: “He seized Joseph and threw him into the jail where the royal prisoners were confined”. He is forgotten and in prison, abandoned by everybody.

**41,1-7. After a lapse of two years, Pharaoh had a dream. He saw himself standing by the Nile, <sup>2</sup> when up out of the Nile came seven cows, handsome and fat; they grazed in the reed grass. <sup>3</sup> Behind them seven other cows, ugly and gaunt, came up out of the Nile; and standing on the bank of the Nile beside the others, <sup>4</sup> the ugly, gaunt cows ate up the seven handsome, fat cows. Then Pharaoh woke up.**

**<sup>5</sup> He fell asleep again and had another dream. He saw seven ears of grain, fat and healthy, growing on a single stalk. <sup>6</sup> Behind them sprouted seven ears of grain, thin and blasted by the east wind; <sup>7</sup> and the seven thin ears swallowed up the seven fat, healthy ears. Then Pharaoh woke up, to find it was only a dream.**

The story continues two years later. Pharaoh’s dreams are first narrated from a neutral point of view (by the narrator). Pharaohs (and kings in general) used to be considered close to the divine realm and thus having dreams and revelations as communication with the divine power. (not as, based on modern psychology, a result of subconscious!)

The Nile River is a symbol of Egypt’s power and prosperity: its regulation and use in agriculture was one of the basic tasks of pharaoh. The seven (sacred number, symbolizing fate) cows rising from the river aren’t usual farm animals. The cow was a symbol of Egypt, the primordial ocean and one of the gods (Isis). Another goddess (Hathor) depicted with a cow-head represented the fertile land irrigated by the Nile. The ugly appearance of the second set of cows and their cannibalism, rightfully, scared the Pharaoh so much that he woke up.

The second dream plays on the fact that Egypt was considered the breadbasket of the Roman Empire producing large quantities of grain which supplied many other regions. (Roman authors report that Egypt was the bread-basket: *The total amount of grain harvested depended on the surface covered by the flooding Nile, which was between perhaps 7,700 and 13,000 square mile. Taking pre-green-revolution wheat yields of about 670 lb/acre as a base, the annual amount of corn produced was approximately between 1.5 and 2.5 million tons, supposing that most of the surface was used to produce corn. About 4 to 5 million people lived in Egypt during the New Kingdom. In a bad year the annual yield was less than 660 lb per head, possibly considerably less.*).

It was possible for an “east wind” to dry up vegetation overnight: “God sent a burning east wind; and the sun beat upon Jonah's head till he became faint” (Jon 4,8). The wind which causes a similar effect blows from the south in Egypt, but in the minds of the Israel audience, this was an east wind. Pharaoh was so scared that he found out it was a dream only when he woke up.

**8-13. Next morning his spirit was agitated. So he summoned all the magicians and sages of Egypt and recounted his dreams to them; but no one could interpret his dreams for him. <sup>9</sup> Then the chief cupbearer spoke up and said to Pharaoh: "On this occasion I am reminded of my negligence. <sup>10</sup> Once, when Pharaoh was angry, he put me and the chief baker in custody in the house of the chief steward. <sup>11</sup> Later, we both had dreams on the same night, and each of our dreams had its own meaning. <sup>12</sup> There with us was a Hebrew youth, a slave of the chief steward; and when we told him our dreams, he interpreted them for us and explained for each of us the meaning of his dream. <sup>13</sup> And it turned out just as he had told us: I was restored to my post, but the other man was impaled."**

The dreams are obviously related and that's why the pharaoh refers to both of them at the same time. The art of interpretation was a highly sophisticated and often polyvalent matter. Nobody was able to offer Joseph a satisfactory explanation.

The cupbearer narrating his story connects with the previous chapter and, in a sense, he is confessing his failure to fulfill his word.

Patristic commentary: John Chrysostom shows the beauty of God's plan. The Egyptians first call all magicians who recognize their inability to decipher the dreams. They step back in front of a prisoner who will explain the mystery. Thus Joseph can show the grace by which he was blessed.

**14-16. Pharaoh therefore had Joseph summoned, and they hurriedly brought him from the dungeon. After he shaved and changed his clothes, he came into Pharaoh's presence.** <sup>15</sup> Pharaoh then said to him: "I had certain dreams that no one can interpret. But I hear it said of you that the moment you are told a dream you can interpret it." <sup>16</sup> "It is not I," Joseph replied to Pharaoh, "but God who will give Pharaoh the right answer."

Here is the climax of the narration and of the entire story of Joseph: from an insignificant slave, he turned out to be on the way to the top of society. Joseph is once again lifted from the "dungeon" (Hebr has "pit" like the pit where his brothers had put him). Shaving, cutting hair and changing clothes was necessary preparation for entering into God's presence, or in front of a king. (The time pressure was so great, that Joseph only got his outer clothes changed).

Rabbinic commentary: salvation from God comes unexpectedly and swiftly. The coming of the Messiah will also be unexpected. God is never late and saves in due time, when we least expect it.

Joseph has to correct the pharaoh about his ability to interpret dreams and he draws attention from himself to God: he gives the proper answer and has the proper understanding. Joseph, remaining humble, offers something better – divine interpretation of the dreams.

**17-24.** These verses offer Pharaoh's version of the dreams. They differ in certain points from the first account (1-7). More weight is placed on the awfulness of the thin cows and thin ears. He also comments: "no one could tell that they had done so, because they looked as ugly as before" (21). His embellishments show that he saw the dreams as threatening and regarded them as a warning for the future.

**25-36. Joseph said to Pharaoh: "Both of Pharaoh's dreams have the same meaning. God has thus foretold to Pharaoh what he is about to do.** <sup>26</sup> The seven healthy cows are seven years, and the seven healthy ears are seven years-- the same in each dream. <sup>27</sup> So also, the seven thin, ugly cows that came up after them are seven years, as are the seven thin, wind-blasted ears; they are seven years of famine. <sup>28</sup> It is just as I told Pharaoh: God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do. <sup>29</sup> Seven years of great abundance are now coming throughout the land of Egypt; <sup>30</sup> but these will be followed by seven years of famine, when all the abundance in the land of Egypt will be forgotten. When the famine has ravaged the land, <sup>31</sup> no trace of the abundance will be found in the land because of the famine that follows it-- so utterly severe will that famine be. <sup>32</sup> That Pharaoh had the same dream twice means that the matter has been reaffirmed by God and that God will soon bring it about. <sup>33</sup> "Therefore, let Pharaoh seek out a wise and discerning man and put him in charge of the land of Egypt. <sup>34</sup> Pharaoh should also take action to appoint overseers, so as to regiment the land during the seven years of abundance. <sup>35</sup> They should husband all the food of the coming good years, collecting the grain under Pharaoh's authority, to be stored in the towns for food. <sup>36</sup> This food will serve as a reserve for the country against the seven years of famine that are to follow in the land of Egypt, so that the land may not perish in the famine."

Joseph's response and interpretation of the dreams consists of two parts: the interpretation proper (25-32) and the actions to be taken for the future (33-36).

There are four main points: both dreams announce the same thing (25-26); there will be periods of seven years (26-27); the years of famine will follow after the years of plenty (29-31); the duplication of the dream shows the certainty (32).

**26-28.** Joseph gives an allegorical interpretation explaining the number seven as standing for seven years. There are other Ancient sources that know the seven-years periods of famine: a text from Siheil in southern Egypt (2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.) tells of a seven-year famine followed by years of plenty in the time of Djoser (c. 2600 B.C.). Whether this is an authentic record of earlier times or a later forgery is disputed, but it shows that the memory of a seven-year-long famine was known in Egypt as in other parts of the ancient Orient. The Gilgamesh epic threatens "seven years of empty husks," as does the Ugaritic epic of Aqht, an Aramaic treaty from Sefire, and even David's prophet, Gad, speaks about 3 years famine (2 Sam 24:13), as well as materials from Mesopotamia. The dream is heaven-sent.

**29-31. Seven years of great abundance are now coming throughout the land of Egypt;** <sup>30</sup> **but these will be followed by seven years of famine, when all the abundance in the land of Egypt will be forgotten. When the famine has ravaged the land,** <sup>31</sup> **no trace of the abundance will be found in the land because of the famine that follows it-- so utterly severe will that famine be.**

The interpretation turns out to be a prophecy: "Behold, seven years of great abundance are now coming". Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are all described as prophets: "as a spokesman he will intercede for you" (20,7). Now Joseph, too, is given the prophetic role, though more similar to the court prophets (like Nathan). The years of famine already foreshadow how Joseph will bring his brothers and their families to join him in Egypt.

**32.** A double repetition is a general means that the thing/situation is established by God and he is in a hurry to do it. The first time his dreams announced that one day his father and brothers would bow down to him. Now God is in a hurry to do it.

**33-36.** <sup>33</sup> **"Therefore, let Pharaoh seek out a wise and discerning man and put him in charge of the land of Egypt. <sup>34</sup> Pharaoh should also take action to appoint overseers, so as to regiment the land during the seven years of abundance. <sup>35</sup> They should husband all the food of the coming good years, collecting the grain under Pharaoh's authority, to be stored in the towns for food. <sup>36</sup> This food will serve as a reserve for the country against the seven years of famine that are to follow in the land of Egypt, so that the land may not perish in the famine."**

After explaining the dream, Joseph gives some concrete indications and measures to adopt as preparation for the hard years of famine. What is interesting here is the strong sense of predestination (God has set everything in advance) combined with practical concerns and summons to action. Since God has determined the matter is exactly the reason for responsible leaders to take measures.

Pharaoh is summoned to act: "Pharaoh should also take action" (34) using the same verb that was otherwise used for God's action in 25, 28, 32. Joseph urges Pharaoh to imitate God and take action. "Let Pharaoh seek out a wise and discerning man and put him in charge of the land of Egypt. Pharaoh should also take action to appoint overseers". (33-34) Appointing a wise man and officers is a good combination: the wise man will need assistance in his heavy task preparing the land for the years of famine. A concrete measure will be to take the fifth part of the produce as "income tax".

**37-46.** This advice pleased Pharaoh and all his officials. <sup>38</sup> "Could we find another like him," Pharaoh asked his officials, "a man so endowed with the spirit of God?" <sup>39</sup> So Pharaoh said to Joseph: "Since God has made all this known to you, no one can be as wise and discerning as you are. <sup>40</sup> You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people shall dart at your command. Only in respect to the throne shall I outrank you. <sup>41</sup> Herewith," Pharaoh told Joseph, "I place you in charge of the whole land of Egypt." <sup>42</sup> With that, Pharaoh took off his signet ring and put it on Joseph's finger. He had him dressed in robes of fine linen and put a gold chain about his neck. <sup>43</sup> He then had him ride in the chariot of his vizier, and they shouted "Abrek!" before him. Thus was Joseph installed over the whole land of Egypt. <sup>44</sup> "I, Pharaoh, proclaim," he told Joseph, "that without your approval no one shall move hand or foot in all the land of Egypt." <sup>45</sup> Pharaoh also bestowed the name of Zaphnath-paneah on Joseph, and he gave him in marriage Asenath, the daughter of Potiphara, priest of Heliopolis. <sup>46</sup> Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh, king of Egypt. After Joseph left Pharaoh's presence, he traveled throughout the land of Egypt.

Pharaoh appreciated Joseph's negative interpretation of his dreams (remember that Pharaoh understood the dreams as threatening as well!). Since Joseph provided a positive outlook as well and measures to take, he was appointed over the land.

**38.** Joseph is characterized as "a man endowed with the spirit of God". The spirit of God equips the skilled workman, the victorious warrior and the wise ruler: "The spirit of the LORD will rush upon you, and you will join them in their prophetic state and will be changed into another man" (1Sam 10,6). "I have heard that the spirit of God is in you, that you possess brilliant knowledge and extraordinary wisdom" (Dan 5,14). Wisdom is one of God's gift and Joseph is characterized as one through whom God speaks (16) and this is recognized by the pharaoh as well (39).

**40.** Joseph is appointed to "be in charge of palace" – pharaoh's house, to administer the royal domains. His job description, however, implies he was actually vizier (/vɪ'zɪər/) – the supervisor of all Egypt with supreme authority and all government activities under his control.

**41-46.** The text gives a very detailed account of Joseph's investment in his function. There are several parallels in the Egyptian history of Semites rising to high state-functions. One of the most striking parallels from the time of Akhenaten is that of Tûtu (Semite), who was appointed the highest mouth in the entire country. The wall paintings on the tomb at Tell el-Amarna show Tûtu's appointment by the Pharaoh, who is putting the golden necklace of the office around his neck. They also show him leaving the palace, getting into his chariot and riding off as the people prostrate themselves before him in acclamation.

Patristic commentary: Joseph, knowing about mystical things, deserved a reward: a ring is the power of faith, robes of linen is clothing of a wise man and a gold chain is intellect. (Ambrose).

Potiphar narrates Joseph's fate to his wife. She confesses and sends Potiphar to follow Joseph's chariot. She believes in forgiveness. (Ephreme)

**45.** Through his Egyptian name and marriage into an Egyptian family, Joseph's promotion is sealed. The exact meanings of the names are disputed, but most likely they refer to Egyptian divinities.

**46.** Thirteen years have passed since Joseph was sold to Egypt as a slave (he was 17 when tending the flock of his father – 37,2). He will see his family again soon and his dreams about glory will be fulfilled.

Patristic commentary: Young age wasn't an obstacle for Joseph in reaching virtues. The spiritual richness is gained through suffering and enduring hardships with faith and hope that God doesn't abandon (John Chrysostom).

**47-57.** <sup>47</sup> During the seven years of plenty, when the land produced abundant crops, <sup>48</sup> he husbanded all the food of these years of plenty that the land of Egypt was enjoying and stored it in the towns, placing in each town the crops of the fields around it. <sup>49</sup> Joseph garnered grain in quantities like the sands of the sea, so vast that at last he stopped measuring it, for it was beyond measure. <sup>50</sup> Before the famine years set in, Joseph became the father of two sons, borne to him by Asenath, daughter of Potiphara, priest of Heliopolis. <sup>51</sup> He named his first-born Manasseh, meaning, "God has made me forget entirely the sufferings I endured at the hands of my family"; <sup>52</sup> and the second he named Ephraim, meaning, "God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction."

<sup>53</sup> When the seven years of abundance enjoyed by the land of Egypt came to an end, <sup>54</sup> the seven years of famine set in, just as Joseph had predicted. Although there was famine in all the other countries, food was available throughout the land of Egypt. <sup>55</sup> When hunger came to be felt throughout the land of Egypt and the people cried to Pharaoh for bread, Pharaoh directed all the Egyptians to go to Joseph and do whatever he told them. <sup>56</sup> When the famine had spread throughout the land, Joseph opened all the cities that had grain and rationed it to the Egyptians, since the famine had gripped the land of Egypt. <sup>57</sup> In fact, all the world came to Joseph to obtain rations of grain, for famine had gripped the whole world.

The last unit rounds off this chapter reporting the actual course of events after the dreams and their interpretation. The previous deliberations are carried out during the first seven years of abundance, where Joseph implements his own advice: "They should husband all the food... collecting the grain... to be stored in the towns for food" (35). The collected grain was "like the sands of the sea" (49) which is an image also used in the promises to Abraham: "I will make your descendants as countless... as the sands of the seashore" (22,17). What immediately follows is the report about the birth of Joseph's two sons, showing thus, how the promise begins to be fulfilled: "Joseph became the father of two sons" (50-52). He is given an Egyptian name and a wife from one of the great priestly families of On (Heliopolis).

Those seven years were thus fruitful for Joseph in this sense too: children and good harvest are a sign of God's blessing.

**51-52.** "Manasseh" (meaning "forget") shows Joseph has not really forgotten his family; since he mentions it right there: "God has made me forget entirely the sufferings I endured at the hands of my family". "Ephraim" (be fruitful) is a key term in Genesis in the promises: "God blessed them, saying, "Be fertile, multiply" (1:22); "God also said to Jacob: "I am God Almighty; be fruitful and multiply" (35,11). Through the choice of names, Joseph is expressing his faith that God has been with him and blessed him.

"The land of my affliction" is an anticipated hint on the slavery the Israelites will later suffer in Egypt.

**54-57.** Long-term famines were not unusual in the ancient times due to failed rainfall in the southern Sudan (Upper Egypt), or in Palestine and Syria. The word "famine" is repeated 5 times in this short account, thus showing the seriousness of the situation. Thanks to Joseph's provisions, the land and people are saved. The last comment "all the world came to Joseph to obtain rations of grain" (57) is a preparation for the next stage of the story when Joseph's family will come to Egypt and Joseph's dream will be fulfilled after 20 years.

## MEDITATIO

### 1. personal level

Our text narrates the summit of Joseph's career. From slave he reached the rank of the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest after the pharaoh. What helped him was his wisdom, faith and trust in God, whom he never denied. He founded a family and sons were born to him, which is a sign of God's blessing. We can see God's pedagogic even in this story: *exaltation of the humiliated*. It shows the importance of being faithful in moments of temptation (deceiving of Puthiphar's wife) and when he was forgotten by everybody. Such endurance is possible thanks to God's Spirit "a man so endowed with the spirit of God" (v. 39) who stayed upon him.

Thus is Joseph qualified as a spiritual person, which is a characteristic aspect of the prophetic and wisdom tradition. The Spirit of God dwells upon the prophets and they are able to illuminate the history of Israel. Even the wisdom of Solomon was inspired by God's Spirit. Thanks to his gifts, Joseph raised up from the bottom, in order to lead the people with authority.

Still, he doesn't exalt himself, but says: "It is not I, but God" (41,16). Speaking about God he says that he wouldn't be able to interpret dreams without him. Joseph is shown as an ideal character: despite failures and suffering he is patient and faithful to God. He shows how to be oneself in poverty and also in abundance.

### 2. communitarian level

The story describes ways in which God is present in the world. Joseph's wisdom and God's blessing extend beyond the religious area. God is present in the world through his elected ones – in economics and spheres of power as well. The problems depicted in this chapter were repeated in every generation and in all countries: they were related to farming, lack of food and bad economic situations. God acts in the world through heroic actions of leadership in everyday life. Joseph shows an approach that can only be desired and hoped for but, on the other side, it is reality and ethics on how to act in history.

### 3. theological level

Joseph is depicted as a complex personality: in him the tension between traditional values and adaptation to a new culture culminates. On one hand, he is a traitor of national and religious values: the pharaoh changes his name, he receives an office, changes his clothes, is shaved, his wife is a daughter of a priest, swears on the pharaoh and uses a translator to communicate with his brothers. He denies his language, traditions and even some customs of faith.

On the other hand he is depicted as a man through whom God saved the world from starvation. Joseph is inserted here as aware of being unable to interpret dreams without God and gives his sons Hebrew names.

Joseph's exaltation and his acceptance of foreign customs show the interconnection of Israel with the pagan Egypt. The author is trying to insert God in the world-context. Many OT-texts don't share this approach. Joseph's exaltation and integration into the pagan environment show that the Bible contains traditions teaching lessons on tolerance and desires to penetrate the non-Israelite environment. Joseph shows that this integration can mean a positive experience and the negative aspects of syncretism can be avoided.

## PRAYER

Almighty God, source of true wisdom! You have made it a gift to people who search your will to help them in dealing with everyday matters of their life and in directing the course of the world towards you. Help us to see your presence in our life especially in hard moments. Help us

to be open for the gift of your wisdom, so that we might prudently administer the goods entrusted to us for the benefit of all the people around us.