

Joseph Interprets Pharaoh's Dreams

41: 1-8

DIG: How do you account for the significant role dreams play in Chapters 37, 40 and 41? What evidence is there that through dreams, ADONAI controls human events? How are these dreams similar? How are they different?

REFLECT: When you need guidance in your life, where do you turn? Friends? Self-help books? The Bible? Your Horoscope? Prayer?

The important dreams in **Joseph's** life always seemed to come in **twos**. First, **he himself** had **two dreams** (37:5-9); then **he** interpreted **the dreams** of the cupbearer and the baker (40:1-23); and now, **Pharaoh**, king of Egypt, had **two dreams**. Furthermore, **Pharaoh's** dreams came **two years** after **his** interpretation of **the dreams** of the cupbearer and the baker. **When two full years had passed, Pharaoh had a dream: He was standing by the Nile (41:1).**

When out of the Nile River there came up seven healthy cows, sleek and fat, and they grazed among the reeds. The cows must have impressed **Pharaoh** especially in a religious sense, because the cow was the emblem of Isis, the revered Egyptian goddess of fertility. In the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, the chief scripture of ancient Egypt, Osiris, the god of vegetation and the underworld, is represented as a great bull accompanied by **seven cows**. Then, unexpectedly, **seven other ugly and gaunt cows came up out of the Nile and chewed up the seven sleek, fat cows.** Such a thing could only happen in a dream, but it was so shocking that it **woke Pharaoh up (41:2-4).**

He fell asleep again and had a second dream. He was out gazing at a grain field, common in the Egyptian fertile plains. As **he** gazed, he saw **seven full heads of grain, healthy and good, growing on a single stalk.** Again, **Pharaoh** must have been impressed with the richness of Egypt, known to all as the granary of the ancient world. But then it happened again, **seven other heads of grain sprouted - thin and scorched by the east wind (41:5-6, also see Ezekiel 17:10, Hosea 13:15-16), and the thin heads of grain swallowed up the seven healthy, full heads.** The dream was so real to him, that it was only when **he woke up that he realized it had been a dream (41:7).** Since **he** was considered a god, it was unusual for **him** to ask for an interpretation of **his** dreams. **He** knew enough to be troubled, but not enough to be **his** own interpreter. **He** tossed and turned all night on **his** bed because the dreams seemed so real. The Egyptians believed that when **dreams** were repeated or came in sets **two** they were special, so **he** was determined to get some help.

In the morning his mind was troubled, so he sent for two groups. First, he sent for all the magicians, or *chartumin*, meaning *sacred scribes*. They were the same men who opposed Moses in Exodus 7:11 when they threw down their staffs, becoming snakes. Secondly, he sent for the wise men, who were the experts in the priest craft and magic of Egypt. They were an order of Egyptian priests who understood the sacred hieroglyphic writings. They cultivated the knowledge of arts and sciences, interpreted dreams, practiced soothsaying and divination, and were supposed to possess secret arts. These were the magi of Daniel 1:20, 2:1-23 and Matthew 2:1-12.⁶³² Pharaoh told both groups his dreams, but no one could interpret them for him even though they were supposed to be the experts (41:8).

Later, another group of magi in Babylon also would be unable to interpret a king's dream, and ADONAI would use another Hebrew slave, Daniel, to show that no matter how powerful a nation might be, it was still not beyond God's sovereign control (Daniel 2:1-49).⁶³³

In ancient Egypt, people believed that the true power in the universe was magic. They relied on magic like omens, sorcery, divination, fortunetelling and dream interpretation to manipulate "the gods" for their own benefit. It was a means to determine the future and to provide understanding of reality. The same is true for many today who rely on astrology and other New-Age instruments to provide meaning to life. But, as in the story of Joseph, the magicians provided no answers. Meaning and purpose belong to the Creator, and we must rest in Him in order to have significance and satisfaction in life.⁶³⁴

When all the magicians and wise men were called in and Pharaoh told them his dream, the chief cupbearer was listening. After all, his position was to stand beside Pharaoh and attend to his every need. When none of the wise men could give Pharaoh an interpretation, the cupbearer remembered Joseph.⁶³⁵