
GENESIS 39:1 Joseph was brought down to Egypt. Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh's, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him from the hand of the Ishmaelites that had brought him down there.

Joseph, being brought to Potiphar's house, prospers in all his undertakings, Gen 39:1-3. Potiphar makes him his overseer, Gen 39:4. Is prospered in all his concerns for Joseph's sake, in whom he puts unlimited confidence, Gen 39:5, Gen 39:6. The wife of Potiphar solicits him to criminal correspondence, Gen 39:7. He refuses, and makes a fine apology for his conduct, Gen 39:8, Gen 39:9. She continues her solicitations, and he his refusals, Gen 39:10. She uses violence, and he escapes from her hand, Gen 39:11-13. She accuses him to the domestics, Gen 39:14, Gen 39:15, and afterward to Potiphar, Gen 39:16-18. Potiphar is enraged, and Joseph is cast into prison, Gen 39:19, Gen 39:20. The Lord prospers him, and gives him great favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison, Gen 39:21, who entrusts him with the care of the house and all the prisoners, Gen 39:22, Gen 39:23.

Verse 1

An officer of Pharaoh, captain of the guard - Mr. Ainsworth, supposing that his office merely consisted in having charge of the king's prisoners, calls Potiphar provost marshal! See Clarke on Gen 37:36 (note), See Clarke on Gen 40:3 (note).

GENESIS 39:2 The LORD was with Joseph, and he was a prosperous man. He was in the house of his master the Egyptian.

GENESIS 39:3 His master saw that the LORD was with him, and that the LORD made all that he did prosper in his hand.

GENESIS 39:4 Joseph found favour in his sight. He ministered to him, and he made him overseer over his house, and all that he had he put into his hand.

Verse 4

He made him overseer - הִפְקִיד hiphkid, from פָּקַד pakad, to visit, take care of, superintend; the same as ἐπισκοπος, overseer or bishop, among the Greeks. This is the term by which the Septuagint often express the meaning of the original.

GENESIS 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 LORD's blessing was on all that he had, in the house and in the field.

GENESIS 39:6 He left all that he had in Joseph's hand. He didn't concern himself with anything, except for the food which he ate. Joseph was well-built and handsome.

Verse 6

Joseph was a goodly person, and well favored - יפה תאר ויפה מראה - yepkeh thoar, vipheh mareh, beautiful in his person, and beautiful in his countenance. The same expressions are used relative to Rachel; see them explained Gen 29:17 (note). The beauty of Joseph is celebrated over all the East, and the Persian poets vie with each other in descriptions of his comeliness. Mohammed spends the twelfth chapter of the Koran entirely on Joseph, and represents him as a perfect beauty, and the most accomplished of mortals. From his account, the passion of Zuleekha (for so the Asiatics call Potiphar's wife) being known to the ladies of the court, they cast the severest reflections upon her: in order to excuse herself, she invited forty of them to dine with her, put knives in their hands, and gave them oranges to cut, and caused Joseph to attend. When they saw him they were struck with admiration, and so confounded, that instead of cutting their oranges they cut and hacked their own hands, crying out, hashah lillahi ma hadha bashara in hadha illa malakon kareemon. "O God! this is not a human being, this is none other than a glorious angel!" - Surat xii., Gen 29:32.

Two of the finest poems in the Persian language were written by the poets Jamy and Nizamy on the subject of Joseph and his mistress; they are both entitled Yusuf we Zuleekha. These poems represent Joseph as the most beautiful and pious of men; and Zuleekha the most chaste, virtuous, and excellent of women, previous to her having seen Joseph; but they state that when she saw him she was so deeply affected by his beauty that she lost all self-government, and became a slave to her passion. Hafiz expresses this, and apologizes for her conduct in the following elegant couplet: -

Men az an husn-i roz afzoon keh

Yusuf dasht danistam Keh ishk az pardah-i ismat beroon arad Zaleekhara. "I understand, from the daily increasing beauty which

Joseph possessed, How love tore away the veil of chastity from Zuleekha."

The Persian poets and eastern historians, however, contrive to carry on a sort of guiltless passion between them till the death of Potiphar, when Zuleekha, grown old, is restored to youth and beauty by the power of God, and becomes the wife of Joseph. What traditions they had beside the Mosaic text for what they say on this subject, are now unknown; but the whole story, with innumerable embellishments, is so generally current in the East that I thought it not amiss to take this notice of it. The twelfth chapter of the Koran, which celebrates the beauty, piety, and acts of this patriarch, is allowed to be one of the finest specimens of Arabic composition ever formed; and the history itself, as told by Moses, is one of the most simple, natural, affecting, and well-told narratives ever published. It is a master-piece of composition, and never fails of producing its intended effect on the mind of a careful reader. The Arab lawgiver saw and felt the beauties and excellences of his model; and he certainly put forth all the strength of his own language, and all the energy of his mind, in order to rival it.

GENESIS 39:7 After these things, his master's wife set her eyes on Joseph; and she said, "Lie with me."

GENESIS 39:8 But he refused, and said to his master's wife, "Behold, my master doesn't know what is with me in the house, and he has put all that he has into my hand."

Verse 8

My master wotteth not - Knoweth not, from the old Anglo-Saxon, witan, to know; hence, wit, intellect, understanding, wisdom, prudence.

GENESIS 39:9 He isn't greater in this house than I, neither has he kept back anything from me but you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?"

Verse 9

How then - וַיִּיָּדַע veeik, and how? Joseph gives two most powerful reasons for his noncompliance with the wishes of his mistress:

1. Gratitude to his master, to whom he owed all that he had.
2. His fear of God, in whose sight it would be a heinous offense, and who would not fail to punish him for it.

With the kindness of his master and the displeasure of God before his eyes, how could he be capable of committing an act of transgression, which would at once have distinguished him as the most ungrateful and the most worthless of men?

GENESIS 39:10 As she spoke to Joseph day by day, he didn't listen to her, to lie by her, or to be with her.

GENESIS 39:11 About this time, he went into the house to do his work, and there were none of the men of the house inside.

GENESIS 39:12 She caught him by his garment, saying, "Lie with me!" He left his garment in her hand, and ran outside.

GENESIS 39:13 When she saw that he had left his garment in her hand, and had run outside,

GENESIS 39:14 she called to the men of her house, and spoke to them, saying, "Behold, he has brought in a Hebrew to us to mock us. He came in to me to lie with me, and I cried with a loud voice.

Verse 14

He hath brought in a Hebrew unto us - Potiphar's wife affects to throw great blame on her husband, whom we may reasonably suppose she did not greatly love. He hath brought in - he hath raised this person to all his dignity and eminence, to give him the greater opportunity to mock us. לִפְחֵק letsachek, here translated to mock, is the same word used in Gen 26:8, relative to Isaac and Rebekah; and is certainly used by Potiphar's wife in Gen 39:17, to signify some kind of familiar intercourse not allowable but between man and wife.

GENESIS 39:15 When he heard that I lifted up my voice and cried, he left his garment by me, and ran outside."

GENESIS 39:16 She laid up his garment by her, until his master came home.

GENESIS 39:17 She spoke to him according to these words, saying, "The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought to us, came in to me to mock me,

GENESIS 39:18 and as I lifted up my voice and cried, he left his garment by me, and ran outside."

GENESIS 39:19 When his master heard the words of his wife, which she spoke to him, saying, "This is what your servant did to me," his wrath was kindled.

GENESIS 39:20 Joseph's master took him, and put him into the prison, the place where the king's prisoners were bound, and he was there in custody.

Verse 20

Put him into the prison - בית סוהר beith sohar, literally the round house; in such a form the prison was probably built.

GENESIS 39:21 But the LORD was with Joseph, and showed kindness to him, and gave him favour in the sight of the keeper of the prison.

Verse 21

The Lord was with Joseph - It is but of little consequence where the lot of a servant of God may be cast; like Joseph he is ever employed for his master, and God honors him and prospers his work.

1. He who acknowledges God in all his ways, has the promise that God shall direct all his steps. Joseph's captivity shall promote God's glory; and to this end God works in him, for him, by him. Even the irreligious can see when the Most High distinguishes his followers. Joseph's master saw that Jehovah was with him; and from this we may learn that the knowledge of the true God was in Egypt, even before the time of Joseph, though his worship was neither established nor even tolerated there. Both Abraham and Isaac had been in Egypt, and they had left a savor of true godliness behind them.

2. Joseph's virtue in resisting the solicitations of his mistress was truly exemplary. Had he reasoned after the manner of men, he might have soon found that the proposed intrigue might be carried on with the utmost secrecy and greatly to his secular advantage. But he chose to risk all rather than injure a kind benefactor, defile his conscience, and sin against God. Such conduct is so exceedingly rare that his example has stood on the records of time as almost without a parallel, admired by all, applauded by most, and in similar circumstances, I am afraid, imitated by few. The fable of the brave and virtuous Bellerophon and Sthenobaea, wife of Proetus, king of the Argives, was probably founded on this history.

3. Joseph fled and got him out. To know when to fight and when to fly are of great importance in the Christian life. Some temptations must be manfully met, resisted, and thus overcome; from others we must fly. He who stands to contend or reason, especially in such a case as that mentioned here, is infallibly ruined. Principiis obsta, "resist the first overtures of sin," is a good maxim. After-remedies come too late.

4. A woman of the spirit of Potiphar's wife is capable of any species of evil. When she could not get her wicked ends answered, she began to accuse. This is precisely Satan's custom: he first tempts men to sin, and then accuses them as having committed it, even where the temptation has been faithfully and perseveringly resisted! By this means he can trouble a tender conscience, and weaken faith by bringing confusion into the mind. Thus the inexperienced especially are often distracted and cast down; hence Satan is properly called the accuser of the brethren, Rev 12:10.

Very useful lessons may be drawn from every part of the relation in this chapter, but detailing the facts and reasoning upon them would be more likely to produce than prevent the evil. An account of this kind cannot be touched with too gentle a hand. Others have been profuse here; I chose to be parsimonious, for reasons which the intelligent reader will feel as well as myself. Let this remark be applied to what has been said on the sin of Onan, Genesis 38.

GENESIS 39:22 The keeper of the prison committed to Joseph's hand all the prisoners who were in the prison. Whatever they did there, he was responsible for it.

GENESIS 39:23 The keeper of the prison didn't look after anything that was under his hand, because the LORD was with him; and that which he did, the LORD made it prosper.
