

CHAPTER 39

INTRODUCTION TO GENESIS 39

In this chapter the history returns to Joseph again, who being brought down to Egypt was sold to Potiphar, with whom he found favour, and who set him over his house, the Lord prospering everything in his hands, (^{<0301>}Genesis 39:1-6); and being a young man of a comely aspect, his mistress lusted after him, and tempted him to lie with her from time to time, but he as constantly refused it, as being both ingratitude to his master, and a sin against God, (^{<0307>}Genesis 39:7-10); at a certain time they being alone in the house, she renewed her solicitations, and laid hold on his garment, which he left in her hand and fled, (^{<0311>}Genesis 39:11,12); upon which she called to her servants without, and accused Joseph of an ill design upon her, and reported the same to her husband when he came home, (^{<0313>}Genesis 39:13-19); upon which his master put him into prison, but he found favour also with the keeper of it, who committed the prisoners and all things relative to them into his hands, (^{<0320>}Genesis 39:20-23).

Ver. 1. *And Joseph was brought down to Egypt*, etc.] By the Ishmaelites, (^{<0328>}Genesis 37:28); as in a following clause:

and Potiphar an officer of Pharaoh, captain of the guard, an Egyptian; as his name also shows, which signifies the fruit of Pot or Phut, that is, the son or grandson of one of that name ^{f1688}; which might be common in Egypt, since it was the name of a son of Ham, (^{<0106>}Genesis 10:6), from whom the land of Egypt is called the land of Ham, (^{<0323>}Psalm 105:23,27 106:22); of this man and his offices, (see Gill on "^{<0336>}Genesis 37:36");

he bought him: that is, "Joseph",

of the hands of the Ishmaelites, who had brought him down thither; what they gave for him we know, but what they sold him for to Potiphar is not said; no doubt they got a good price for him, and his master had a good bargain too, as appears by what follows.

Ver. 2. *And the Lord was with Joseph*, etc.] Blessing him with his gracious presence, with discoveries of his love, and communion with himself, though destitute of the means of grace and ordinances of worship he enjoyed in his father's house; favouring him with bodily health, and protecting him from all evils and enemies:

and he was a prosperous man; in worldly things, and which was owing to the presence of God with him, and his blessing on him:

and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian; he continued there, and did not attempt to make his escape; or his employment lay chiefly, if not altogether, in the house, and herein he was prosperous, and continued to be so as long as he was in it; the Jews ^{f1689} say, he remained here twelve months. Near the pyramids built in the neighbourhood of Memphis, as is affirmed unanimously by the ancients, to this day is shown a hill, on which they say the house of Potiphar was built, whose servant the patriarch Joseph was, and some of the rubbish of the bricks are yet to be seen ^{f1690}.

Ver. 3. *And his master saw that the Lord [was] with him*, etc.] He knew nothing of the spiritual and gracious presence of God that was with him, he was no judge of that; but he perceived by the ingenuity of his mind, by his ready and speedy learning the Egyptian language, by his dexterity in business, and by the prudence and faithfulness with which he did everything, that he was highly favoured by the divine Being, and had great endowments bestowed upon him, and was an extraordinary person for his age:

and that the Lord made all that he did to prosper in his hand; and though Potiphar might have no knowledge of the true Jehovah, whose name he uses, yet he might have a notion of a supreme Being, and that all outward prosperity was owing to him; and knowing Joseph to be an Hebrew, as it is plain his wife did, (^{<01394>}Genesis 39:14); and Jehovah to be the God of the Hebrews, he imputes all the prosperity that attended Joseph and his services unto his God.

Ver. 4. *And Joseph found grace in his sight*, etc.] In the sight of his master, as he did in the sight of God, he had favour both with God and man; his master had a high esteem of him, and a great value for him, and showed him much kindness and respect:

and he served him; readily, willingly, cheerfully, and faithfully; or he served him personally; his master took such a liking to him, that he selected him

from the rest of his servants to wait on his person, and to be what we now call a “valet de chambre”, whose business was to dress and undress him, to wait upon him at table, etc.

and he made him overseer over his house, and all [that] he had he put into his hand; that is, after he had served him some time, in the capacity of a valet, he advanced him, and made him the head servant, or steward of his house, and committed all his business, cash, and accounts to his care, and put all his servants under him.

Ver. 5. *And it came to pass from the time that he had made him overseer in his house, and over all that he had,* etc.] How long he was in this office is not certain; there must be some time for the following observation; and during all the time he was in it, it was easily discerned,

that the Lord blessed the Egyptian’s house for Joseph’s sake; that is, much more than before; everything under his hands succeeded before, but now much more abundantly; Potiphar’s family was blessed with health, his substance increased, he grew rich and wealthy, and abounded with all good things:

and the blessing of the Lord was upon all that he had in the house, and in the field; his domestic affairs prospered, his fields brought forth plentifully, his cattle were fruitful and stood well; every thing belonging to him within doors and without happily succeeded, through the blessing of God upon it, and all for Joseph’s sake.

Ver. 6. *And he left all he had in Joseph’s hand;* etc.] His master took no care of anything, but committed all to him, trusted him with his money and with his accounts, and with the management of all his affairs; such confidence did he put in him;

and he knew not aught he had, save the bread which he did eat; some understand this of Joseph, that though he had all his master’s substance in his hands, yet he made no use of it for himself, enjoyed nothing of it but the bread he ate; and it is the observation of a Jewish writer^{f1691}, that he ate nothing but dry bread, and yet, like Daniel and his companions, was well favoured and of a goodly countenance, as in the next clause: but it is better to interpret it of Joseph’s master, who was so satisfied with Joseph’s good management and fidelity, that he never concerned himself about his affairs, how they stood or what money he had in his house, or what effects he was possessed of; all that he regarded was his food, and perhaps he knew not

what that would be till it came to his table; though some take the expression in this light, that he gave himself unto a luxurious life, regarding nothing but eating and drinking, and taking his pleasure, having so good and faithful a servant: but according to Aben Ezra the sense is, that Joseph had all committed to his care, excepting the bread, or making provision of that for him and his family, which he might not touch being an Hebrew, and had all things common with him but that, (see ^{<0432>}Genesis 43:32); which is a much better sense than what the Targum of Jonathan and Jarchi give, who interpret bread of his wife, whom only he reserved for himself of all things in his house;

and Joseph was [a] goodly [person], and well favoured; being like his mother, as Aben Ezra observes, (see ^{<0429>}Genesis 29:17); this is remarked for the sake of what follows, and as leading on to that.

Ver. 7. *And it came to pass after these things,* etc.] After he was the overseer of his house; in which office, after he had been some time, so it was

that his master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph; he being a handsome young man, caught her eye, and that her heart, and led her on to lust after him, and frequently fed her eyes with amorous glances at him;

and at length being fired with lust, and having an opportunity,

she said, to him, in a bold and impudent manner, in plain words, having given signs and hints, and dropped expressions tending thereto before, as it is probable:

lie with me; now directly, there being both opportunity and convenience, perhaps her chamber was near: this was a very great temptation to a young man in single life and living well, from his mistress, who had it greatly in her power to make him should he consent, or ruin him should he deny.

Ver. 8. *But he refused, and said unto his master's wife,* etc.] Reasoning with her about the evil nature of the crime she tempted him to, which to commit would be ingratitude, as well as injury to his master, and a sin against God; by which it appears that Joseph was a partaker of the grace of God, and that this was in strong exercise at this time, by which he was preserved from the temptation he was beset with:

behold, my master wotteth not what [is] with me in the house; what goods or money are in it:

and he hath committed all that he hath to my hand: such confidence did he repose in him, wherefore to do such an injury to him as to commit adultery with his wife, would be making a sad return, and acting a most ungrateful part for such favour shown him.

Ver. 9. [*There is none greater in this house than I*, etc.] Not any of the servants of the house, he was the chief of them, who had all the rest under him; or rather, “he himself is not greater^{f1692} in this house than I”; that is, his master was not greater than he: he had a greater propriety in the house and the things of it, and he had the original power and authority in it, but had not a greater use of it; Joseph had authority over all the servants, and everything in the house at his command, and the free use of everything his master had, excepting what follows:

neither hath he kept back anything from me but thee, because thou [art] his wife; and is a reason not only why his master retained her for his own use, but why he should not touch her, and why she should not solicit him to it:

how then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God? the words are emphatic in the original, “this! this wickedness! this great one!” adultery was reckoned a great sin among all nations, and this, had Joseph committed it, would have been greatly aggravated by the favours his master had conferred upon him; and not only a sin against himself, his soul and body, and against his master, but, above all, a sin against God, contrary to his holy nature, revealed will, and righteous law; all which prevailed upon Joseph to refuse the offer made him, which he could not comply with, in honour or with a good conscience.

Ver. 10. *And it came to pass, that as she spake to Joseph day by day,* etc.] Continually, incessantly, hoping in time to prevail upon him to comply with her desires; so that the temptation, as it was strong, and very ensnaring, it was urgent, and frequent, and pressed with great importunity; which required the more grace and spiritual strength to resist:

that he hearkened not unto her; not only did not yield to her, but would not give her an hearing, at least as little as possible he could, lest he should be overcome by her persuasions:

to lie by her, [or] to be with her; she might tempt him to lie by her, if he would not lie with her; or to lie, as Aben Ezra interprets it, in a place near her, in a chamber next to hers, in hopes by degrees to gain her point; but he would not yield to either, nor to be in her company, and have any conversation with her, at least as little as possible, that he might not be in the way of temptation, and be led into it; though these phrases may all signify carnal copulation with her, which was what his mistress solicited, and he would not hearken to her in, and comply with her.

Ver. 11. *And it came to pass about this time*, etc.] About a week, or a month, or rather a year, as Aben Ezra thinks, after she first began her solicitations to him. According to Josephus^{f1693}, it was a public festival, at which women used to attend; but she excused herself, pretending illness; and so Jarchi takes it to be some noted day at the idol's temple, to which all used to go; but she pretended she was sick, and could not go, knowing that Joseph would not be there, but at home, and therefore judged this a fit opportunity to attack him once more: and so it was,

that [Joseph] went into the house to do his business: to inspect the accounts, as the Targums of Onkelos and Jonathan paraphrase it, and settle them:

and [there was] none of the men of the house there within; being all gone to the public festival, or however there were none in that part of the house where Joseph was.

Ver. 12. *And she caught him by his garment, saying, lie with me*, etc.] It is very probable that before this time, as soon as ever she began to speak to him, he got away as fast as he could, and would not hear her; wherefore she now laid hold on his garment, in order to detain him, that she might have time to parley with him, and so prevail:

and he left his garment in her hand, and fled, and got him out; it was his outward loose garment she laid hold on, out of which he slipped himself, and so got clear of her, and ran away, and got out of the house as fast as he could: this he did, because he would not struggle with his mistress for his garment, which no doubt by his strength he could have got from her; and partly lest he should by handling of her have carnal desires excited in him, and so be overcome with her temptation.

Ver. 13. *And it came to pass, when she saw that he had left his garment in her hand*, etc.] And so all hopes of succeeding in her addresses to him were over:

and [he] was fled forth; into the streets, or into some out house, where business was carried on by servants under him.

Ver. 14. *That she called unto the men of her house*, etc.] Of that part of the house which belonged to her; her eunuchs that waited upon her, or that were in another part of the home, at some distance:

and spake unto them; when they came to her:

saying, see, he hath brought in an Hebrew unto us to mock us: she means her husband, whom through contempt, and in her passion, she names not, having lost all affection for him, as her addresses to Joseph showed; and so the Targum of Jonathan supplies it,

“your master hath brought, etc.”

and Joseph she calls an Hebrew by way of reproach, and with a view to set her servants against him; who before this might not have any great regard to him through envy at him, for the favours he enjoyed, and the authority he had; and because he prevented their doing wrong things to serve themselves, and hurt their master: and holding up his garment in her hand, which they knew full well, bid them look at it, and observe, that this was the issue of his Being brought into the house by their master; that though it was not with such an intention, which can hardly be thought to be her sense, yet this was the event of it; an attempt to abuse, vitiate, and corrupt her, and so bring contempt upon the whole family, and expose them to the scorn and mockery of men, for their mistress to be abused by a base foreigner: she explains herself more fully by saying,

he came in unto me to lie with me, and I cried with a loud voice; both of them lies; for it was she that solicited him to lie with her, and not he; nor did she cry out at all; and if she did, how came it she was not heard by them, as well as when she called unto them; thus her impure love was turned into hatred, which put her upon framing lies and calumnies; and which has been also done in cases similar to this ^{f1694}, as Sthenobaea against Bellerophon.

Ver. 15. *And it came to pass, when he heard that I lifted up my voice and cried,* etc.] He attempting to ravish her, as she would have it understood, but afraid, lest upon her outcry those that were in the house should come in to her assistance, and seize on him:

that he left his garment with me, and fled, and got him out: but why should he strip himself of his garment, and leave that behind him? he might have fled with it.

Ver. 16. *And she laid up his garment by her,* etc.] As a proof of what she laid to his charge, and as a testimony against him:

until her lord came home; or until his lord came home, for the pronoun refers to Joseph, and so Jarchi interprets it; who either was gone a journey, or gone to court that day, being an officer of Pharaoh's, or to the public place where the festival was kept that day, if it was such an one.

Ver. 17. *And she spake unto him according to these words,* etc.] When her husband came home she related to him the above affair, according to the purport of the above words, and in much the same manner, and to the same import as she had to the men of her house:

saying, the Hebrew servant which thou hast brought unto us came in unto me to mock me; in an obscene manner, using filthy words and actions, contrary to the rules of chastity as well as good manners; or, in other words, to lie with her, which she pretended he solicited.

Ver. 18. *And it came to pass, as I lifted up my voice and cried,* etc.] For help from the servants, and frightened at his insolent attempt:

that he left his garment with me, and fled out; and then she brought it forth, and showed him it.

Ver. 19. *And it came to pass, when his master heard the words of his wife,* etc.] The story she related concerning Joseph, which was her own invention, and a lie:

which she spake unto him, saying, after this manner did thy servant to me; attempting to violate her chastity, as she pretended:

that his wrath was kindled; that is, against Joseph, without strictly examining her words, which they would not bear, her story being but ill put together, and without hearing Joseph's defence.

Ver. 20. *And Joseph's master took him, and put him into the prison,* etc.] Which was in or adjoining to his house, (^{<041B>}Genesis 40:3); of himself he had power to do this, as the captain of the guard; and as he was the chief of the executioners, as some take his office to be, it is much he did not in his passion deliver him up into their hands to put him to death at once; but it may be through the great respect he had had for Joseph, which was not wholly extinguished by this impeachment of him; and especially if he heard Joseph's apology for himself before he committed him, his passion might subside a little, though for the credit of his wife he might take this step; or however things were so overruled by the providence of God, who has the hearts of all men in his hands, that he should do what he did. The word for "prison" has the signification of roundness, and may be rendered the "round house"^{f1695}, or "round tower"; and some Jewish writers, as Mercer observes, take it to be in this form, that it was made under ground, and at the top of it was an hole which let in light, and at which they went into it. Aben Ezra is at a loss to say whether it is an Hebrew or Egyptian word, and inclines to the latter, because he thinks it is explained in the next clause:

a place where the king's prisoners [were] bound; such as were guilty of high treason, or however of high crimes and misdemeanours against him; and so was a prison in which men were strictly kept and used hardly, as was Joseph at first, as appears from (^{<0A51B>}Psalms 105:18):

and he was there in the prison; he continued there, some of the Jewish writers say^{f1696} ten years, others twelve^{f1697}; and so long he must be, if he was but one year in Potiphar's house; for there were thirteen years between his being sold into Egypt, and his appearance before Pharaoh; he was seventeen when he was sold, and he was thirty when he stood before Pharaoh, being took out of prison, (see ^{<0157B>}Genesis 37:2 41:46); but it is more likely that he was a longer time in Potiphar's house, and a lesser time in prison.

Ver. 21. *And the Lord was with Joseph,* etc.] Comforting him with his presence under his afflictions; supporting him with his right hand; sanctifying all his troubles to him, and so causing him to bear them patiently and cheerfully:

and showed him mercy, and gave him favour in the sight of the keeper of the prison; who was the underkeeper to Potiphar; God so wrought upon the heart of this man, that he was merciful to him, and took off the iron

fetters, which hurt his feet, and gave him liberty to walk about; and many other favours and kindnesses he showed unto him, as follow.

Ver. 22. *And the keeper of the prison committed to Joseph's hand all the prisoners that [were] in the prisons,* etc.] Who, as they were state prisoners, were a considerable charge; and this gave Joseph great honour, credit, and influence in the prison:

and whatsoever they did there, he was the doer [of it]; not that he learned and exercised every trade the prisoners were of, to get a living by, which is the sense of some, as Aben Ezra relates; or that he in fact did everything that was done in the prison: but the meaning is, that he gave orders for the doing of everything, and there was nothing done without him; all that was done, as the Targum of Jonathan paraphrases it, he commanded it to be done; or, as Onkelos, all that was done was done by his word, that is, by his authority and command.

Ver. 23. *The keeper of the prison looked not to anything [that was] under his hand,* etc.] Under the hand of Joseph; he did not inquire into and examine his conduct and management of things; he took no account of what was in his hands, nor required any of him; so satisfied was he with what he did, and had such an opinion of his prudence and faithfulness. The Targums of Onkelos and Jonathan paraphrase it,

“he saw no crime in him,”

either in the management of affairs he committed to him, or for which he was put into prison, and therefore did not use him as he did other prisoners:

because the Lord was with him; supplying him with his grace, giving him wisdom to do everything in the best manner committed to him, which caused the keeper of the prison to respect him as he did:

and [that] which he did the Lord made [it] to prosper; every method he took to secure the prisoners, every scheme he formed to bring them to confession of their crimes, or to clear those that were innocent; and every other thing relative to prison affairs, all through the good hand of God upon him, guiding, directing, and blessing him, succeeded well, which gained him the favour and good will of the keeper and the prisoners.