

PHARAOH'S DREAMS: AN EXTENDED INTERPRETATION

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Joseph is the subject of many intriguing stories in the Bible, but perhaps the most enigmatic one is his interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams. Freud¹ cites Joseph's analysis of Pharaoh's dreams as an example of symbolic dream interpretation, viz., it "regards the dream content as a whole and seeks to replace it by another content which is intelligible and in certain respects analogous." In the Bible it is stated that none of Egypt's wise men could interpret Pharaoh's dreams, but according to Genesis Rabbah (89:6) they did in fact provide an explanation, saying that the dreams referred to the conquest and revolt of seven provinces and the birth and burial of seven daughters. The Midrash records that these interpretations "did not enter his ears" – they did not ring true to Pharaoh. Why, then, did Joseph's interpretation appeal to him? Beyond its simplicity and apparent logic, Joseph interpreted the content of the dream and its symbols as a whole.

To fully appreciate Joseph's interpretation, we must ask a few questions about the details of Pharaoh's dreams. Why did Pharaoh specifically visualize cows rather than other animals in the first dream, and why were they emerging from the River Nile? Is there any relevance to the vision of the healthy corn and the scorched corn in the second dream beyond Joseph's recognition that the dreams were the same? Answering these questions will explain why Pharaoh responded so quickly to Joseph's analysis.

One has to understand the beliefs of ancient Egyptians fully comprehend the mysterious elements in Pharaoh's dream. The Egyptians worshipped over a hundred deities, but one goddess has particular significance where Pharaoh's dream is concerned. That goddess was Hathor², daughter of Ra, the sun god. Egyptians worshipped her for over 3,000 years. Hathor was believed to have several important functions. She was visualized as a gigantic cow

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stretched over the heavens, taking care of the Milky Way, which the Egyptians called the Nile in the Sky. Her most vital function for the Egyptians was causing the Nile to overflow its banks each year. This provided fertile soil on which crops (e.g., corn) could grow. Without such annual flooding Egypt would have been a famine-ridden wasteland. The most striking relevance of the goddess to Pharaoh's dream is that in some instances she would appear as seven Hathors.³ In this form she was often present at births, foretold the future, and was associated with the Nile's inundation and the subsequent grain harvest.

Being familiar with the goddess and her attributes, Pharaoh recognizes the wise intent of Joseph's advice. The seven fat cows represent the fertility of the land, embodied in the Egyptian symbol of seven Hathors. This concept is reinforced by the seven full ears of corn in the second dream. In addition, the cows emerging from the river also indicate that they stand for the goddess Hathor, caretaker of the Nile. Joseph's interpretation thus drew upon Egyptian symbols well known to Pharaoh and used them effectively to explain the whole dream. That is why it rang true in the ears of Pharaoh.

NOTES

1. S. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (New York: Macmillan, 1900) ch. 2, p. 1.
2. B. Lesko, *The Great Goddesses of Egypt* (Stillwater, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999).
3. G. Massey, *The Natural Genesis* (London, 1883), reprinted 2007, Part 2, p.1. See also J. Hastings, *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2003) p. 711.