

Living to Serve: The Cupbearer's Dream (Gen 40)

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Abstract

At first glance, it seems that the cupbearer's dream (Gen 40) does not require a special symbolic interpretation. Aside from the three branches symbolizing three days, Joseph interpreted the dream literally: the cupbearer will be restored to his esteemed position and serve wine to the king. Nonetheless, this article raises the possibility that there is a symbolic meaning in the vine's blossoming (40:10), which Joseph interpreted with the words: "Pharaoh will lift up your head" (40:13). According to this suggestion, the cupbearer's dream and the baker's dream should be explained in similar ways: both dreams are symbolic dreams in which the official is represented by the produce he is responsible for.

Keywords

Genesis 40 – dreams – Joseph – symbol – cupbearer – wordplay

At first glance, the dream of the chief cupbearer and its meaning seem quite straightforward: in his dream, he sees three vine branches blossoming and yielding grapes, and after having squeezed them into Pharaoh's cup, he brings the cup to Pharaoh. According to Joseph's explanation, the cupbearer's dream heralds what is going to happen in the future: in another three days, the cupbearer will return to his position and serve wine to the king. Thus, scholars generally perceive the meaning of the cupbearer's dream as being primarily straightforward and not symbolic. Aside from the three branches symbolizing three days, Joseph interpreted the dream literally: in three days, the cupbearer will be restored to his esteemed position and serve wine to the king.

Es gibt in dem Traum eigentlich nur Einen Zug, der der Deutung, d. h. der Übersetzung aus der Symbolsprache des Traumes bedarf: die Zahl drei. Dies ist nämlich der einzige scheinbar überflüssige Umstand, denn für die Sache hätte auch Ein Zweig genügt; höchstens noch die Schnelligkeit, mit der alles in v. 10 sich vollendet, denn alles andere ist Abbildung der Wirklichkeit.¹

In other words, even if the dream of the cupbearer belongs to the category of a “symbolic dream” (and not a “message dream”), since it contains no overt verbal message,² it must be seen as a symbolic dream whose meaning is self-evident.³

This reading, though acceptable, presents certain issues. From the outset, the narrator draws striking, deliberate parallels between the two ministers and their respective dreams.⁴ The narrator introduces the two ministers together:

- 1 Jacob, *Genesis*, 737. See further Westermann, *Genesis*, 76: “Allegorical interpretation has no place here; the episode in the dream is put into relationship with the episode that Joseph announces. The dream is a parable of what happens.” Lanckau, *Der Herr der Träume*, 211: “Der Trauminhalt ist immer noch direkt verständlich”; Janssen, “Egyptological Remarks,” 65; Alter, *Genesis*, 231.
- 2 As Husser (*Dreams*, 22) has pointed out, the differentiation of symbolic dreams and message dreams can already be found in Artimedorus of Daldis (second century AD). Ehrlich and Oppenheimer adopted these two categories in their important studies on dreams, and many followed them. See Ehrlich, *Traum im Alten Testament*; Ehrlich, “Traum”; Oppenheim, “Interpretation of Dreams,”; Mendelsohn, “Dream”; Gnuse, *Dream Theophany*. On the slight difference between the views of Artimedorus of Daldis and Oppenheim, see Husser, *Dreams*, 100. Fidler (“Here Comes This Dreamer,” 58 n. 23) preferred the definition “allegory” to “symbolic.” For criticism of this classification, see Zgoll, *Traum*, 23–27.
- 3 This kind of dream is sometimes called “a theorematic dream.” On the definitions “songs théorématiques” / “songs allégoriques,” see Vergote, *Joseph*, 50; Husser, *Dreams*, 100. Oppenheim (“Interpretation of Dreams,” 206) writes that there are symbolic dreams in the Bible that are self-evident and hardly require an act of interpretation. As an example, he cites Joseph’s own dreams: “There are, however, a few instances of ‘symbolic’ dreams in which interpretations can be dispensed with. Such are the self-explanatory dreams of Joseph foretelling his future supremacy over his family (Gen 37:5f. and 9f). It is immediately evident to Joseph as well as to his brothers (a) that the sheaves bowing to his sheaf, or that the sun and the moon and the eleven stars showing their submission to him, forecast future events, and (b) that the sheaves and the stars ‘symbolize’ the brothers, while the luminaries refer in the same way to his parents. Their reactions show this. The structure of this dream is very simple; it substitutes objects and phenomena in the sky for persons, taking even their social rank into consideration.” A similar position was also presented by Whybray, “Genesis,” 61; Wildavsky, *Assimilation*, 70; Wilson, *Joseph*, 115. There is room to disagree with this example. There is no real reason to see the elements of the sky as the members of Joseph’s family, except for the fact that this follows the first dream, which does represent Joseph’s family (see also Husser’s discussion: *Dreams*, 113). A much better example of Oppenheim’s theory is the cupbearer’s dream.
- 4 Amit, *In Praise of Editing*, 77; Zakovitch, *I will Utter Riddles*, 41–43.

Sometime later, the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt offended their master, the king of Egypt. Pharaoh was angry with his two officials, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker, and put them in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, in the same prison where Joseph was confined. The captain of the guard assigned them to Joseph, and he attended them. After they had been in custody for some time (Gen 40:1–4).

The cupbearer and the baker both “offended their master,” and Pharaoh is angry with his “two officials.” He punishes them as one, placing “them” in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, where Joseph is confined. The captain of the guard assigns Joseph to “their” service, and “they” remain in prison together.

The narrator’s effort to present the cupbearer and baker as one entity extends to their dreams:

Each of the two men—the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt, who were being held in prison—had a dream the same night, and each dream had a meaning of its own. (40:5).

The two of them dream “the same night,” and this simultaneity is further emphasized by the reiteration of details already conveyed to the reader: “the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt who were held in the prison.” Some argue that this phrase is a later addition,⁵ which may be justified. Another possibility, however, is that this repetition serves to generate unity of time, place, and action.⁶

The two dreamers’ inseparability continues the next morning when they meet Joseph:

When Joseph came to them the next morning, he saw that they were dejected. So he asked Pharaoh’s officials who were in custody with him

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- 5 Dillmann, *Genesis*, 361; Rudolph and Volz, *Der Elohist als Erzähler*, 158; Simpson, *Early Traditions*, 135; Redford, *Joseph*, 30. See also the discussion of Schmitt, *Die nichtpriesterliche Josephsgeschichte*, 32. It should be pointed out that, a plot repetition throughout the Joseph narrative emerges from various characters, such as from Joseph himself (40:15), from Pharaoh (41:1–32), from the cupbearer (41:9–13), and others. See further Grossman, “Joseph’s Brothers.”
- 6 Cf. Longacre, *Joseph*, 153; Wilson, *Joseph*, 113. This is reminiscent of the description of Ahasuerus’ two eunuchs (Esth 2:21–23), who both shared the same fate in the end. On the relationship between the two ministers in Genesis and the two eunuchs in Esther, see Levenson, *Esther*, 65; Laniak, *Shame and Honor*, 213.

in his master's house, "Why do you look so sad today?" "We both had a dream (חלום)," they answered, "but there is no one to interpret it (אֹתוֹ)." Then Joseph said to them, "Do not interpretations belong to God?⁷ Tell me your dreams." (Gen 40:6–8).⁸

They both look sullen; Joseph turns to them both; they answer him together; and their use of the singular—"a dream" (and not "dreams"), "to interpret it"—implies that these are similar dreams with a similar interpretation.

At first glance, the two dreams bear striking similarity.⁹ Each minister dreams within the domain of his profession, incorporating three elements relevant to their occupation (three branches and three baskets). The cupbearer's grape juice reaches Pharaoh, while the king's baked goods are consumed by birds. In ancient Near Eastern symbolism, birds are associated with royalty, especially the king.¹⁰ The Egyptian deity Horus who bestows pharaonic kingship is depicted with a hawk's head. According to this, just as the cups of wine in the dream of the chief cupbearer reached the king, also the pastry on the head of the chief baker reached the king, who is represented in the dream by a bird. This reading of the birds' role remains speculative, but it is certainly plausible.

Moreover, the language of Joseph's interpretation maintains the impression of their similarity. While Joseph ultimately determines that the two dreams have different meanings, these meanings are presented in similar language. For example, some note that the phrase "this is what it means" (זֶה פִּתְרוֹנוֹ) is mentioned before both ministers' dreams, but not before the interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams.¹¹

Many note the wordplay of the phrase "Pharaoh will lift up your head" in both interpretations. Joseph tells the cupbearer: יִשָּׂא פִּרְעָה אֶת רֹאשְׁךָ (v. 13); and says to the baker: יִשָּׂא פִּרְעָה אֶת רֹאשְׁךָ מֵעֵלֶיךָ (v. 19). The addition of מֵעֵלֶיךָ

7 Septuagint: "And Joseph said to them, Is not the interpretation of *them* through God?"

8 Some modern translations do not express the singular, and the reader of the translation may mistakenly think that the verse refers to the plural: "We both had *dreams*," they answered, "but there is no one to interpret *them*." (Gen 40:8) Other translations meticulously preserve the singular language in the verse; e.g. JPS (1917) and NASB (1995).

9 It is true that the cupbearer's dream is dynamic and the dreamer is active, whereas the baker's dream is static and the dreamer is passive, but even so, at first glance the dreams' similarities outweigh these differences. Many have commented on this point, e.g., Wildavsky, *Assimilation*, 84; Pirson, *Lord of the Dreams*, 53; Wilson, *Joseph*, 117. Contrary to Richter ("Traum," 204–205) who wrote that the cupbearer's dream consists of "einem Bild" as well.

10 Zakovitch, *I will Utter Riddles*, 41.

11 Husser, *Dreams*, 107; Ede, *Die Josefsgeschichte*, 144.

changes the idiom from figurative to literal: "Pharaoh will lift up your head" / "Pharaoh will lift up your head ... off of your body."¹²

It is this close similarity which proves that Joseph's skill at solving dreams is remarkable, even God-given: many, perhaps, would have discerned that both ministers were crestfallen, but few if any would be able to distinguish between such similar dreams: "Any normal man would have interpreted these very similar dreams similarly. Joseph, however, demonstrates his great skill by discerning their quite opposite meanings."¹³

This misleading similarity does not just serve to characterize Joseph; it drives the plot itself. Joseph's keen ability to distinguish between two similar dreams is just what Pharaoh needs three days and two years later (41:1), when he himself will dream two similar dreams, an event that causes the chief cupbearer to remember the young Hebrew who is especially skilled in distinguishing between this kind of close dreams.¹⁴

While Joseph presents both interpretations using similar language, his methodology for interpreting each dream differs significantly. Indeed, some argue that Joseph uses a symbolic approach to the cupbearer's dream as well:

Der Traum selbst gestaltet sich als Symboltraum mit numerischen und bildlichen Elementen, deren (Be-)Deutung von Josef separat in zwei Phasen dargelegt wird. Zunächst wird die im Traum vorkommende Zahl

12 Shupak ("Fresh Look," 120 n. 54) is correct in claiming that the MT can be maintained as it is and there is no need to explain מַעֲלֵי־רֹאשׁ is dittography (as claimed, e.g., by Skinner, *Genesis*, 463). See also the discussion of Lanckau, *Der Herr der Träume*, 226. Many have commented on this wordplay. See especially Marcus, "Lifting Up the Head," who shows how this pun was lost in some translations, and Noegel, *Nocturnal Ciphers*, 28–32, who points out other puns in this scene. See also Redford, *Joseph*, 54, on the corresponding Egyptian phrase. Regarding the third appearance of the phrase in the narrative—"He lifted up the heads of the chief cupbearer and the chief baker in the presence of his officials" (Gen 40:20)—Montgomery (*Kings*, 569) correctly notes that this is a technical term that means "make an account, book." As Speiser ("Census and Ritual Expiation") shows, the Akkadian conjunction should also be seen in this sense: *rēšam našūm*. The further assimilation of the phrase in the sentence, even if in a different instruction, reinforces this wordplay. See also Kaddari, *Dictionary*, 734.

13 Gunkel, *Genesis*, 413. As Homrighausen ("Forgetting the Forgetter," 54) wrote: "Since the narrator has partnered them through their own words, their separation through Joseph's diverging dream interpretations is all the more dramatic."

14 Ironically, Joseph understood Pharaoh's pair of dreams as only one dream, so they did not really need his unique skills to distinguish between two similar dreams. The question of the relationship between two dreams that are dreamed in the same scene throughout the Joseph story is one of the critical questions regarding this story, since it has implications for the solution of the pair of dreams Joseph dreamed about his relationship with his brothers. See Schmid, "Josephs zweiter Traum"; Grossman, "Different Dreams."

als ein bestimmter Zeitraum interpretiert. Danach erfolgt die Deutung des bildlichen Elements: sprießender Weinstock, aufgefressenes Gebäck, fette und magere Kühe.¹⁵

However, as mentioned, most believe that while Joseph reads the baker's dream symbolically—with the baker symbolizing the gallows and the royal pastry representing the baker's flesh that birds will peck away—he reads most of the cupbearer's dream literally, without need for interpreting symbols.¹⁶ Besides the three branches representing three days, the rest of the dream simply refers to the cupbearer preparing and serving wine to the king once more.

Yet upon closer consideration, reading most of the cupbearer's dream in a literal way does not ring true, even when considered independently from the baker's dream interpretation. It is not clear why such a banal interpretation stirs such admiration from the baker (40:16). Moreover, a partly literal reading deviates from the rest of the dream interpretations in the Joseph narrative, as the other five dreams are all read in an entirely symbolic way: the bowing sheaves in Joseph's dream (37:7) represent his brothers who will be subservient to him; the celestial bodies in his second dream (37:9) symbolize his family members; the plump and gaunt cows (41:1–4) and the plump and thin ears (41:5–7) in Pharaoh's dreams represent years of agricultural abundance and famine; the baker's dream, as mentioned, is also read symbolically. So why should only the cupbearer's dream be understood in a literal way?

Moreover, since the three branches of the vine mentioned at the beginning of the chief cupbearer's dream are deciphered symbolically (40:12), as a representation of three days, it is more than peculiar that in the middle of the dream Joseph seemingly changes his method of interpretation and begins to interpret it literally.

In the following I will suggest a reevaluation of Joseph's proposed interpretation of this dream; contrary to popular belief, I will argue that all the elements of this dream too should be understood symbolically.

15 Ede, *Die Josefs Geschichte*, 142.

16 See further Grossman, "Different Dreams," 722–726. It is true that the interpretation that Joseph offered of the baker's dream also emerges from the scene that the baker saw in his dream: "For the butler, finding three branches on a vine and squeezing grape juice into Pharaoh's cup and handing it to him would represent a return to work at Pharaoh's side, and the three days was a likely time scale. On the other hand, to the baker, birds marauding the topmost basket of bread of the three he was carrying on his head to the kitchens would represent a failure in his duties to palace provisioning" (McKay, "Dreams," 161. See also Fretheim, "Genesis," 615; Skinner, *Genesis*, 463; Leupold, *Genesis*, 1015; Wilson, *Joseph*, 118). However, Joseph interprets the elements of the dream symbolically.

First of all, it is worth noting a detail that is seemingly overlooked in Joseph's interpretation: "As soon as it budded, it blossomed, and its clusters ripened into grapes" (40:10). In his dream, the cupbearer witnesses the buds on a vine rapidly blossoming and ripening into clusters of juicy grapes. Intriguingly, Joseph makes no explicit reference to this part of the dream.

The vine's growth is interpreted in three different ways:

1. Von Rad claimed that in every dream there are also elements that do not take part in its meaning. In Joseph's ability to pass over "the unimportant and insignificant parts, his charismatic power becomes evident."¹⁷ According to this view, the vine's growth has no contribution to the meaning of the dream.
2. Some argue that the vine's growth symbolizes the passing of three days: "The interpretation, a short time (= three days), derives from the instantaneous process of ripening."¹⁸ This is not convincing; a complete agricultural cycle can symbolize an entire year or at least season, and if this were its meaning, Joseph would propose that a longer time would pass before the cupbearer's return to his post. Moreover, Joseph reads the three baskets in the baker's dream as three days (40:18), without any reference to rapid baking.
3. Others posit that the blooming vineyard symbolizes renewal and growth, pointing to the cupbearer's promising fate.¹⁹ Similarly, Diana Lipton suggested that the cupbearer's supervision of the entire winemaking process, from the vine's budding, hints that he will soon return to his duties:

In waking life, it's unlikely that the cupbearer's job description included winemaking, so why did he dream that he oversaw every step of the wine-making process, from the vine's first bud to the wine's last drop? One answer is that, in his dream, the cupbearer functioned as his own supervisor, taking complete responsibility for the wine he served to Pharaoh. If something was wrong with it, he would or should have known. He neither hid from the truth in his dream, nor tried to hide the truth from Joseph, the person he entrusted with his interpretation. This cupbearer's total transparency could explain why Joseph knew he was innocent.²⁰

¹⁷ Von Rad, *Genesis*, 366.

¹⁸ Westermann, *Genesis*, 76. See also Jacob, *Genesis*, 737; Sarna, *Genesis*, 278; Lanckau, *Der Herr der Träume*, 211, 352; Wildavsky, *Assimilation*, 83.

¹⁹ Zakovitch, *I will Utter Riddles*, 42.

²⁰ Lipton, "Sweet Dreams," 3.

This third approach suggests that the blossoming of the vine is a general symbol of the cupbearer's blossoming career and integrity.

Before I propose an alternative reading for the vine's symbolism, I should highlight another aspect, which complements the first aspect like the other side of the coin: With 40:13 ("Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your position") there is one element in Joseph's interpretation that does not have an obvious referent in the dream. At first glance, one might agree with Kenneth Matthews and his observation that this expression "has no correlation with a specific feature of the dream."²¹ Yet it is surprising that Joseph makes a general prediction of the cupbearer's fate based solely on the dream's conclusion rather than referring to its vivid, specific imagery.

Joseph's words: "Pharaoh will lift up your head", might be explained by the claim that the phrase's purpose is to generate a connection between the cupbearer's dream and the baker's dream, where the head plays a central role (bearing the three baskets). This would be more convincing if the cupbearer's head was mentioned in the dream itself. Hermann Gunkel in fact posits that cupbearer's description of the vine should be read not as "in front of me" (לְפָנַי) — as presented in the MT — but rather "over my face" (עַל פָּנַי), which is akin to the baker's baskets "on his head,"²² given the proximity between "face" and "head." This proposal is intriguing, but the suggested textcritical change is not substantiated by any ancient witness.²³

The key to unlocking the dream's symbolic meaning, I believe, lies in pairing the element in the dream that seems to lack interpretation (the budding and blossoming of the vine) with the element in Joseph's interpretation that does not have an obvious corresponding component in the dream itself (the restoration of the cupbearer's head to his position). Gordon Wenham might allude to this possibility: "The mention of his picking and squeezing grapes *could be allegorical* if it was not part of the cupbearer's usual duties."²⁴

21 Matthews, *Genesis*, 748. Cf. Lanckau, *Der Herr der Träume*, 351.

22 Gunkel, *Genesis*, 413. In Homrighausen's words ("Forgetting the Forgetter," 56): "He omits one crucial detail: the grapes on the vine being turned into wine before going into the cup. As anyone who has paid attention to their dreams can attest, this telescoping of time, this skipping the logical steps required of reality, is typical of oneiric experience and its waking recall."

23 Others (like Lanckau, *Der Herr der Träume*, 227) attributed the fundamental difference between the dreams to this very point: the baskets are *above* the baker's head, while the vine is placed *before* the cupbearer.

24 Wenham, *Genesis*, 383. Yet, as I have pointed out, watching the vine bud and blossom is *not* part of the cupbearer's usual duties.

However, considering that serving wine *is* one of his usual duties,²⁵ it is noteworthy that the cup presented to the king does not reach his lips, and he does not drink it. The liquid's journey begins as a bud upon the vine that ripens and is plucked by the cupbearer and ends in the king's hand. This raises another intriguing question, asked by many: Why is the king served fresh grape juice, rather than wine? Hermann Gunkel remarks:

The rapid growth of the vine, for example, is fantastic, as is the fact that Pharaoh drinks the juice pressed from grapes. This element, which has occasioned all manner of remarkable perspectives, can be explained by the fact that Pharaoh would do such a thing only in a dream. In reality, of course, he drinks wine.²⁶

Even if we adopt the assumption of Gunkel that Pharaoh would not drink grape juice in real life, he is mistaken when he states that the Pharaoh drinks grape juice in the dream—in the dream, he does not drink anything at all. The cup is only placed in his hand.

These observations illuminate the objective of these dreams: their focus is not on what the king consumes, but where the products end up. The baker's cakes are eaten by birds, while the cup of pressed grape juice reaches the king's hand.

This leads to the following conclusion: just as the baker is symbolically represented by the baked goods on his head, the cupbearer is symbolically represented by the wine that reaches the king's hand. Considering this, the blossoming of the vine seems to symbolize the regrowth of the cupbearer himself, who will soon leave the prison and serve the king's hand once more. Thus, Joseph's interpretation of the cupbearer's dream fully elucidates its content. The meaning of the phrase "to lift a head," is "takes account of him," or "to cite, to summon" (2 Kgs 25:27);²⁷ this aptly expresses how the cupbearer will soon be lifted from the dungeon below to the palace on high.

The affinity between the dream and its interpretation is also evident through the parallel structures:

25 Contra Lipton, "Sweet Dreams," 3.

26 Gunkel, *Genesis*, 412–413.

27 Rabinowitz, "Neo-Babylonian," Zenger, "Die deuteronomistische Interpretation," 23. Thus also the Akkadian counterpart *rêša našû*; see Meek, "Bible Translation," 271; Oppenheim, "Idiomatic Accadian," 252–253; Hamilton, *Genesis*, 480. Speiser (*Genesis*, 305, 308) suggests that the linguistic conjunction already alludes to "a pardon."

“And on the vine were three branches” (v. 10) = “The three branches are three days.” (v. 12)

“As soon as it budded, it blossomed, and its clusters ripened into grapes” (v. 10) = “Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your position.” (v. 13)

“Pharaoh’s cup was in my hand, and I took the grapes, squeezed them into Pharaoh’s cup and put the cup in his hand” (v. 11) = “And you will put Pharaoh’s cup in his hand, just as you used to do when you were his cupbearer.” (v. 13)

Both dreams anticipate their dreamer’s imminent position. In three days, one minister will bloom again in the king’s palace, while the other will hang on the gallows. The cupbearer will even recall their respective movements two years later, when he recommends Joseph to Pharaoh: “And things turned out exactly as he interpreted them to us: I was restored to my position, and the other man was impaled” (41:13).

The focus on the position of the two dreamers is crucial for understanding the grapevine’s symbolism within the dream. Growth and plants are a common biblical symbol of rebirth and renewal.²⁸ The wicked are likened to a dead tree: “No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground” (Isa 40:24). The righteous are likened to a flourishing vine. One famous example is found in the aforementioned psalm: “You transplanted a vine from Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it” (Ps 80:8); there are many other examples.

Prophetic literature frequently employs imagery of trees and branches as metaphors for renewal even when all seems lost: “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a branch will bear fruit” (Isa 11:1).²⁹ Vineyards are especially common metaphors: “In that day—Sing about a fruitful vineyard: I, the LORD, watch over it; I water it continuously” (Isa 27:2–3); “People will dwell again in his shade; they will flourish like the grain, they will blossom like the vine” (Hos 14:7).

28 Schökel, *Das Alte Testament*, 329–330; Nielsen, “ēš,” 274. This is true not only in the Bible, but also in general literature. See, e.g., Jones, “Tree”; Ijpelaar, “Good Trees”; Agapkina (“Tree Symbolism”) shows that in Slavic literature the apple tree symbolizes fertility. This is an interesting comment in the context of Song 8:5. A similar symbol accompanies the vine in early Christian art; see Snyder, “Early Christian Art,” 458.

29 See further Feliks, *Nature and Man*.

In his dream, the cupbearer watches over the three branches, awaiting the moment they yield worthy grapes—when he will become fruitful and productive once more.

Support for this interpretation is found in the unusual use of the word כֵּן. Joseph uses it in verse 13, and this is the phrase that the cupbearer repeats when recounting the young Hebrew's acumen: "I was restored to *my position*" (כֵּן) (Gen 41:13). Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, the word כֵּן is rarely used in relation to a person (thus in Dan 11:7–10).³⁰ Basically the word means to "stand firm," "be stable";³¹ and this concept is metaphorically extended to express a person's status or position. Another sense of the word, however, is "sapling" or "tree trunk," particularly "vine." This is evident in Ps 80:15: "Look from heaven, and behold, and be mindful of this vine. And of the stock (כֵּנֶה) which Thy right hand hath planted, and the branch that Thou madest strong for Thyself." (JPS)

The meaning of כֵּנֶה in this context remains unclear, but given the parallelism with "vineyard" and its juxtaposition with the verb "planted," the reading that כֵּנֶה means "seedling," particularly a grapevine seedling, is convincing.³² Some even point to a semantic relation between a vine's branches and the meaning "base," "stand firm," given that "the branches of the tree rest" upon its trunk.³³ If so, this further supports the reading that the dream's blooming vine branches symbolize the cupbearer's return to his position.

The use of wordplay, ambiguous language, and puns such as כֵּן, which means both "position" and "vine," is a classic feature in biblical descriptions of dreams.³⁴ Gideon, for example, overhears the Midianite's dream about a loaf of barley bread rolling into the Midianite camp (Judg 7:13). There are various explanations for the dreamer's friend's interpretation that this refers

30 As often happens in such cases, some scholars speculate that this is a case of later redaction (see the discussion in Dilmann, *Genesis*, 363). But sometimes precisely these places invite complex and elaborate expressions.

31 Martens, "כֵּן," 615.

32 Kaddari, *Dictionary*, 517. Likewise, in Phoenician כֵּן can have the meaning of "seedling," and so also in Syriac (Brockelmann, *Lexicon Syriacum*, 333a). After discussing different positions, Grünberg ("Exegetische Beiträge," 306–309) decides that the word means "seedling" and, in the context of the psalm "vine seedling," mainly in light of the affinity to Syriac. For other options, see Koch, "kûn," 92. For various suggestions for correcting the verse, see Gunkel, *Die Psalmen*, 355; Rofé, "Text-Criticism." Since this psalm is also specifically aimed at the restoration of the vine and its replanting (see, e.g., Cole, *Shape and Message*, 94; Ross, *Psalms*, 683–700), the connection to the cupbearer's dream is even clearer.

33 Slouschz, "Canaanite Hebrew Studies," 345.

34 It is worth noting that such language plays are prevalent in the dreams of Pharaoh's chiefs, as Noegel ("Dreams," 56–57) shows.

to Gideon's sword, symbolizing Israel's victory: the loaf of barley bread may hint to the agricultural Israelite culture (= bread) as opposed to the nature of Midianite culture, especially in light of the fact that the Gideon narrative opens with the hero "threshing wheat in a winepress" (Judg 6:11).³⁵ Another possibility is that the connection between barley bread and Gideon's sword is based on wordplay between "bread" (לֶחֶם) and "war" (מִלְחָמָה), which further enhances the narrative's depth and meaning.³⁶ Similarly, Amos sees a vision of "a basket of ripe fruit" (קִיץ) as a symbol that "the time is ripe (בֹּא הַקֵּץ) for my people Israel" (Amos 8:2); Jeremiah, too, sees the "branch of an almond tree" (מִקְלֵי שֶׁקֶד) signifying that God is "watching to see (שׁוֹקֵד) that my word is fulfilled" (Jer 1:11–12); there are countless examples in the Bible.

Similarly, such wordplay was integral to dream interpretations throughout the ancient world. For example, in Assyrian Dream-Book it is spelled out: "If [he dreams that] he eats a raven (*āribu*)—income (*irbu*) will come"; "If [he dreams that] one gives him *miḥru*-wood: he will have no rival (*māḥiru*)."³⁷

Thus, in addition to representing himself in his own dream when he serves the cup to Pharaoh, the cupbearer is also symbolized by the flowering vine and the grape juice he passes to Pharaoh's hand. Like the cup he serves, the cupbearer himself will once again be privileged to stand before Pharaoh. The emphasis placed on the cup passing from hand to hand expresses this: Pharaoh's cup is in the cupbearer's "hand"; he then squeezes the grapes into Pharaoh's cup, and finally places the cup "on Pharaoh's hand."

Hence, it makes sense that the dream ends before Pharaoh takes a sip; it ends with Pharaoh's hand, not his mouth. This serves to emphasize the cup's place, not its consumption. If the dream's main message is that the cupbearer—symbolized by the wine in Pharaoh's cup—is to return to Pharaoh's presence, then what matters is that the cup is indeed back in Pharaoh's hand.

Notably, the hand is a recurring motif of agency and executive power throughout the Joseph narrative,³⁸ and this motif certainly resonates in this context. For example, in the previous chapter, Joseph is sold to Potiphar from "the hand of the Ishmaelite" (39:1), and his new master entrusted his estate's management to Joseph's "hand" (39:4). Here, too, the cupbearer's hand

35 Soggin, *Judges*, 142; Amit, *Judges*, 139; Nelson, *Judges*, 152. Keil and Delitzsch (*Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, 345) suggested another analogy between barley bread and Israel: "Whilst the loaf of barley bread, which was the food of the poorer classes, is to be regarded as strictly speaking the symbol of Israel."

36 König, *Stilistik*, 10–13; Boling, *Judges*, 146; Zakovitch, *I will Utter Riddles*, 28–29. Apparently, there is also a semantic connection between "bread" and "war" in various Semitic languages; see Gluck, "*lḥm*"; Krotkoff, "Fleisch und Brot"; Dommershausen, "*leḥem*," 521–522.

37 Oppenheim, "Interpretation of Dreams," 272, 277. See also Noegel, "Literary Craft."

38 Grossman, *Joseph*, 179–180. Cf. Gen 41:42.

indicates that he will return to his duties and once again oversee the king's wine, under Pharaoh's "hand."³⁹

There is room to cautiously debate whether the cupbearer's symbolic representation in his dream (as well as the baker's representation as baked goods) is perhaps hinted to through the shifting epithets used in the narrative. Many scholars have questioned why the text refers to the ministers as both "chief cupbearer" (שר המשקים) and "chief baker" (שר האופים) (Gen 40:2, 9, 16, 20–23) as well as the more concise "cupbearer" (המשקה) and "baker" (האופה) (40:1, 5).⁴⁰ The Hebrew term משקה functions as both verb (Neh 1:11) and noun (Lev 11:34), referring both to the act of giving to drink as well to the drink itself. Perhaps the juxtaposition of משקה with the formal title "שר המשקים" within our narrative hints to this ambiguity: to the fact that the cupbearer appears as both butler and the wine he serves in his own dream.

This interpretation thus maintains the symmetry of the two dreams and their interpretations. While the two ministers have different fates—one is restored to his position in the palace and the other is hanged—both dream symbolic dreams in which each is represented by the produce he is responsible for. The king's bread—the baker himself—is eaten by birds, whereas the king's wine, like the cupbearer, is returned to the king's hand and protection.

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39 Perhaps also Joseph's use of the word יד to refer to Pharaoh's hand, even where in the dream it is referred to as כף, contributes to the prominence of the hand.

40 See, e.g., Procksch, *Genesis*, 226; Westermann, *Genesis*, 75; Gunkel, *Genesis*, 411; Redford, *Joseph*, 30; Grossman, *Joseph*, 181–182.

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