Sweet Dreams? Interpreting Food in the Dreams of Pharaoh's Cupbearer and Baker

So…once I started thinking about the role of food and drink in this story, I realized that I'd stumbled across a tool that could help uncover what was going on behind the scenes.

See Also: From Forbidden Fruit to Milk and Honey: A Commentary on Food in the Torah (Urim Publications: 2018).

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When you look at a familiar text through an unfamiliar lens, you see new things. Here's an example. I did my PhD at Cambridge University on dreams in the book of Genesis (Lipton:1999). My focus was dreams in the patriarchal narratives (Abraham's, Abimelech's, Jacob's, and Laban's). Since they had already been subjected to the close reading I planned to conduct, I chose not to write about the dreams in the Joseph story. I read a lot about them, though, and thought I knew pretty much what there was to say. So I was surprised when, rereading the account of the dreams of the cupbearer and the baker (Genesis 40) through the lens of food, I saw dimensions of the story that were completely new to me. Now I wonder how I managed to miss so much for so long.

The story is well-known, but I recommend rereading it, as I did, with food and drink uppermost in your mind (my italics below to aid that process).

> Genesis 40:1 Sometime after this, the cupbearer of the king of Egypt and his baker sinned against their lord the king of Egypt. 2 Pharaoh was angry with his two officers [or eunuchs], the *chief cupbearer and the chief baker*, 3 and he put them in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, in the prison where Joseph was confined. 4 The captain of the guard charged Joseph with them, and he waited on them; and they continued for some time in custody. 5 One night they both dreamed—the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt, who were confined in the prison—each his own dream, and each dream with its own meaning. 6 When Joseph came to them in the morning, he saw that they were troubled. 7 So he asked Pharaoh's officers, who were with him in custody in his master's house, "Why are your faces downcast today?" 8 They said to him, "We have had dreams, and there is no one to interpret them." And Joseph said to them, "Do not interpretations belong to God? Please tell them to me." 9 So the chief cupbearer told his dream to Joseph, and said to him, "*In my dream there was a vine before me, 10 and on the vine, there were three branches. As soon as it budded, its blossoms came out and the clusters ripened into grapes. 11 Pharaoh's cup was in my hand; and I took the grapes and pressed them into Pharaoh's cup, and placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand."* 12 Then Joseph said to him, "This is its interpretation: the three branches are three days; 13 within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your office; and *you shall place Pharaoh's cup in his hand, just as you used to do when you were his cupbearer*. 14 But remember me when it is well with you; please do me the kindness to make mention of me to Pharaoh, and

so get me out of this place. [15] For in fact I was stolen out of the land of the Hebrews; and here also I have done nothing that they should have put me into the dungeon." [16] When the chief baker saw that the interpretation was favorable, he said to Joseph, *"I also had a dream: there were three cake baskets on my head, [17] and in the uppermost basket there were all sorts of baked food for Pharaoh, but the birds were eating it out of the basket on my head."* [18] And Joseph answered, "This is its interpretation: the three baskets are three days; [19] within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head—from you!—and hang you on a pole; *and the birds will eat the flesh from you."* [20] On the third day, which was Pharaoh's birthday, *he made a feast for all his servants*, and lifted up the head of the chief cupbearer and the head of the chief baker among his servants. [21] He restored the chief cupbearer to his cup-bearing, and he placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand; [22] but the chief baker he hanged, just as Joseph had interpreted to them. [23] Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him (biblical translations lightly adapted from NSRV).

As is typical with biblical narrative, there's not much here in the way of background. But once I started thinking about the role of food and drink in this story, I realized that I'd stumbled across a tool that could help uncover what was going on behind the scenes.

I'll focus here on three questions. (1) How did Joseph deduce from the two dreams that one dreamer was guilty and the other innocent? (2) Why did Joseph expect Pharaoh to deal with his two prisoners at his birthday party? (3) What did the cupbearer and the baker do to make Pharaoh angry? Questions one and two can, of course, be answered: With God's help. But here as elsewhere in the Joseph story, divine intervention goes hand in hand with human endeavor (Greenstein:1982, and Amit:1987), and it is human endeavor that interests me here.

How did Joseph deduce from the two dreams that one dreamer was guilty and the other innocent?

We often dream of ourselves living some version of our waking lives. If we have jobs, we dream of ourselves at work, interacting with colleagues, and performing – or failing to perform – our daily tasks. The dreams of the cupbearer and the baker fall into this category of 'professional' dreams, and since both men are in the catering business, it's not surprising that they dreamt about food and drink.

As Joseph made clear in his interpretation of the cupbearer's dream, the essence of professional cup-bearing is serving:

> Genesis 40:13 Within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your office; and you shall place Pharaoh's cup in his hand, just as you used to do when you were his cupbearer.

Joseph implies that the function of the vine was to indicate the passage of time between the dream's interpretation and fulfilment. Judging by the cupbearer's initial dream report, however, the vine signified more than Joseph let on.

> Genesis 40:9 So the chief cupbearer told his dream to Joseph, and said to him, "In my dream there was a vine before me, [10] and on the vine, there were three branches. As soon as it budded, its blossoms came out and the clusters ripened into grapes. [11] Pharaoh's cup

was in my hand; and I took the grapes and pressed them into Pharaoh's cup, and placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand."

The vine was not just a picturesque backdrop that reflected the dreamer's profession. It sped miraculously from buds through blossoms to ripe grapes, and moreover the cupbearer interacted with it, picking the grapes and pressing their juice into Pharaoh's cup. In waking life, it's unlikely that the cupbearer's job description included wine-making, 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 its interpretation. This cupbearer's total transparency could explain why Joseph knew he was innocent.

At the heart of a baker's job is food preparation. Bakers sift, mix, knead, form and bake; they typically assemble ingredients, perhaps even grinding the wheat themselves to make flour. With respect to the professional activities of the cupbearer and baker (if not their clothing!), this painter has it right. How do we know that we're looking at Joseph in prison with the cupbearer and the baker? Because, alongside a reinforced door complete with iron-barred peep-hole, and of course the chains and stocks, the artist depicts an overturned flagon such as the one from which the cupbearer filled Pharaoh's cup, and bundles of wheat from which a baker could grind flour.



Joseph, the butler and the baker, Gerbrand van den Eeckhout, Dutch, 1621–1674 (1643)

But the painting is misleading. Pharaoh's baker did not dream about sifting, mixing, kneading and baking, still less grinding and gathering wheat. In his dream, he merely transported the food that Pharaoh ate. Whereas the cupbearer assumes full responsibility for the wine he

served to Pharaoh, dreaming that he oversaw every step of the production, the baker abdicated all responsibility for his baked goods. He even transported them at a distance, carrying them on his head where he couldn't see them, describing them as 'a selection of Pharaoh's food', not 'a selection of goods I baked', and failing to protect them from predatory birds.

Joseph interpreted the birds as symbols of the baker's unhappy end, an indication of the baker's guilt. Being eaten by birds is a very bad sign (Jeremiah). But it could also hint at wish-fulfilment. If, in waking life, birds had eaten the baker's food before it reached its destination, perhaps he wouldn't have been in prison in the first place.

Why did Joseph expect Pharaoh to deal with his two prisoners at his birthday party?

As commentators have observed, Joseph would probably have been aware that Pharaoh's birthday was approaching. He would likely have known, too, of traditions associated with the birthday celebration, but even if he didn't, he could have guessed.

The information that Pharaoh held a banquet on his birthday seems at first too obvious to mention. But let's pause for a moment over why we celebrate birthdays with food, notably (at least in the west today) birthday cakes. Aside from the obvious point that many kinds of celebrations involve food – eating makes us happy! – there's a deep connection between food and life. Birthdays celebrate another year of life, and eating and drinking are among the most life-affirming of all human activities. Indeed, without nutritional sustenance, there is no life at all.

When the birthday in question is a king's, the picture is a more complicated. Kings need to demonstrate, ritually and ceremonially, that their subjects' lives are in their hands. Dispensing food at a birthday party functions as just such a symbolic demonstration of power: I have lived another year, and because of me, you have too. Your life, and your death, are in my hands; now I'm feeding you, but tomorrow I could withhold your food.

Another means by which rulers demonstrate their absolute power involves a dramatic enactment in which they choose, or allow their subjects to choose, who lives and who dies. Roman emperors achieved this at the colosseum, when they gave the thumbs up, or down, that determined whether a gladiator would live or die.

Something similar, and closer to our story, is reported in the New Testament concerning Jesus' crucifixion. In the context of a highly political discussion about imperial power, Pontius Pilate reminds the Jews of their 'Passover custom', not mentioned in any sources outside the New Testament, of asking the emperor to release a prisoner. It's easy to see the attraction of this for a Jewish community – liberating a prisoner is a powerful symbol of the freedom associated with Passover. But what was in it for the emperor or his representative? Like the colosseum, it showcased his control over life and death, demonstrating that his is the highest authority. In the event, Pilate offered the Jews a choice between two prisoners, Barabas and Jesus. They chose Barabas, and all the rest is history.

This brings us back to Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker. Perhaps Joseph knew or anticipated that Pharaoh would celebrate his birthday with a demonstration of his absolute power, and he recognized that his two co-prisoners were made to measure for the purpose. Perhaps, indeed, they were being kept in custody for precisely this occasion.

What did the cupbearer and the baker do to make Pharaoh angry?

Dreams often emerge from anxiety – we dream about what worries us and what we fear. Since the cupbearer and the baker were in prison, awaiting a possible death sentence for offending their all-powerful ruler, there's no need to look far for a plausible source of anxiety.

The cupbearer and the baker were food workers, and they dreamt about their jobs. It would be surprising if their crime did not involve food. This was the conclusion of a rabbinic interpretation in the 5th century BCE midrashic collection, *Genesis Rabbah*:

> **Genesis Rabbah 88.2.** THAT THE BUTLER OF THE KING OF EGYPT AND HIS BAKER SINNED AGAINST THEIR LORD. The Rabbis said: A fly was found in the goblet prepared by the butler, and a pebble in the baker's confection. Hence it states, THAT THE BUTLER OF THE KING AND HIS BAKER SINNED AGAINST THEIR LORD, which means, in their duties to their lord (translation lightly adapted from Soncino: 1939).

From what we know about oriental despots, a fly in the wine or a pebble in the cake could have been crime enough to justify a spell in prison or even a death sentence. But there's no indication that Joseph's Pharaoh is a despot on this model; on the contrary, he seems thoughtful, fair, trusting and trustworthy. Burning the bread or serving vinegary wine was not sufficient.

Another stereotype of ancient Near Eastern kingship is court intrigue: courtiers plot to remove their rivals, and even to kill the king himself. The Bible's most vivid account of such goings-on at court is in the book of Esther.

> Esther 2:21 In those days, while Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs, who guarded the threshold, became angry and conspired to assassinate King Ahasuerus. 22 But the matter came to the knowledge of Mordecai, and he told it to Queen Esther, and Esther told the king in the name of Mordecai. 23 When the affair was investigated and found to be so, both the men were hanged on the gallows. It was recorded in the book of the annals in the presence of the king.

Mordecai gained access to King Ahasuerus's court by two routes. First, at Mordecai's suggestion, his cousin Esther entered and won a beauty contest to replace the recalcitrant Vashti. Second, Mordecai raised the alarm when he overheard Bigthan and Teresh, two of the palace gatekeepers, plotting to assassinate the king. Bigthan and Teresh are described as *sarisim*, a term that can mean both 'officer' and 'eunuch'. (The choice of which translation to use depends on context, but the two meanings often overlap. As well as being less threatening in the harem, eunuchs were believed to have fewer conflicts of interest – no descendants – and thus made more reliable courtiers.) Like Bigthan and Teresh, the cupbearer and the baker were *sarisim*, and just like them, Pharaoh's guilty baker was impaled or hanged on a stake or tree (Gen. 40:22).

The same matrix of motifs – a royal court, angry kings and courtiers, plotting eunuchs – can be found in the three-volume 'universal history' by Diodorus of Sicily, a Greek historian writing between 60 and 30 BCE (my italics).

17.5.3As our narrative is now to treat of the kingdom of the Persians, we must go back a little to pick up the thread. While Philip was still king, Ochus ruled the Persians and oppressed his subjects cruelly and harshly. *Since his savage disposition made him hated, the chiliarch Bagoas, a eunuch in physical fact but a militant rogue in disposition, killed him by poison administered by a certain physician and placed upon the throne the youngest of his sons, Arses.* 17.5.4He similarly made away with the brothers of the new king, who were barely of age, in order that the young man might be isolated and tractable to his control. *But the young king let it be known that he was offended at Bagoas's previous outrageous behaviour and was prepared to punish the author of these crimes*, so Bagoas anticipated his intentions and killed Arses and his children also while he was still in the third year of his reign. 17.5.5The royal house was thus extinguished, and there was no one in the direct line of descent to claim the throne. Instead Bagoas selected a certain Dareius, a member of the court circle, and secured the throne for him. He was the son of Arsanes, and grandson of that Ostanes who was a brother of Artaxerxes, who had been king. 17.5.6As to Bagoas, an odd thing happened to him and one to point a moral. *Pursuing his habitual savagery, he attempted to remove Dareius by poison. The plan leaked out, however, and the king, calling upon Bagoas, as it were, to drink to him a toast and handing him his own cup compelled him to take his own medicine* (*Diodorus Siculus*, 17.5.3-6, http://Perseus.uchicago.edu).

The book of Esther's Bigthan and Teresh were clearly part of a bigger Persian picture, but conceptually, if not temporally and geographically, Pharaoh's servants may also belong there. Not coincidentally, the continuation of the midrash quoted above builds on another parallel between the two narratives: both feature anger in the context of court politics.

> **Genesis Rabbah 88.3**. AND PHARAOH WAS ANGRY, etc. (Gen 40:2). Rabbi Judah ben Rabbi Simon and Rabbi Hanan quoted in Rabbi Johanan's name: Come, and see the works of God, etc. (Ps. 66:5). He incensed servants against their masters to confer greatness upon the righteous, and masters against their servants to confer greatness upon the righteous. Thus, *Pharaoh was angry* with his servants (Gen 41:10), so that He might confer greatness upon Joseph; *Bigthan and Teresh were angry* (Est 2:21) with Ahasuerus, so that He might confer greatness upon Mordecai. [As to the plots of Bigthan and Teresh against Ahasuerus], Rabbi Judan reported the following opinions. Rab said: They placed short daggers in their shoes; Rabbi Hanan said: They made a contrivance to strangle him; Samuel said: They hid a snake in his bowl. In respect of all these, Inquisition was made of the matter, and it was found to be so (translation lightly adapted from Soncino: 1939).

Being a palace gatekeeper may not carry great authority, but it is a position of enormous power. Even if Bigthan and Teresh lacked their own motive to assassinate Ahasuerus, they were potentially susceptible to bribery or blackmail, and thus a natural port of call for enemies of Ahasuerus. The same logic applies to the cupbearer and the baker. Even if they were too far from the throne to have their own designs on Pharaoh's life, they were the gatekeepers for his body and this a target for his enemies. What made Pharaoh angry with the cupbearer and the baker, I think, was the discovery that one of them was party to a foiled assassination attempt. The question was which one of them, and that was the question that Joseph answered when he interpreted their dreams.

Commentators have pointed out that Joseph, Esther and Mordecai belong to the category of 'court Jews' (Koller: 2014). Reading the story of Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker through the lens of food supports this observation, and deepens its significance. Mordecai was perfectly positioned to influence Ahasuerus to save the Jews from what may be history's first recorded anti-Semitic attack (Est 3:8-11), both because his cousin Esther had the king's ear (a privilege she reinforced with dinner invitations, but that's another story), and because he saved the king's life. Ahasuerus did not learn about Mordecai's role immediately, but only when insomnia stuck, and his courtiers read him excerpts from the book of records (*zikhronot)*, chronicles. Joseph gained access to Pharaoh's court when, some time after the event, the cupbearer finally mentioned (*mazkir*, same Hebrew root as *zikhronot*) to Pharaoh the 'sin' that led to his prison encounter with Joseph (Gen 41:8-13). In other words, even before Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dreams and saved Egypt from mass starvation, he had already interpreted two other dreams – the dreams of the cupbearer and the baker – that also dealt with the life or death of Pharaoh and hence all Egypt, and of course, with food!

Bibliography

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Further reading

From Forbidden Fruit to Milk and Honey is a commentary on what the Torah is talking about when it is talking about food. For what ancient Israelites ate, see:

MacDonald, Nathan, *Not Bread Alone: The Uses of Food in the Old Testament* (2008), Oxford: Oxford University Press.