

# The dream of Pharaoh's Chief Cupbearer: A response to Philo of Alexandria

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**Summary.** Genesis 40 tells of the Joseph's interpretation of the dream of Pharaoh's chief cupbearer. The scope of this article offers a novel argument against Philo of Alexandria for his negative hermeneutics of the chief cupbearer's dream and allegorical implications, as he replaces linguistic terms in the Hebrew and/or Greek text, "cupbearer" with "eunuch". The allegorical method which might account for similarities of dream interpretations between Philo and the Freudian and Jungian school is discussed.

**Keywords:** allegorical dreams; cupbearer; eunuch; Philo of Alexandria

Joseph's apocalyptic capability as a godsend to interpret dreams ("Do not interpretations belong to God?", Gen. 40:8) elevates himself to Pharaoh after Joseph successfully enunciates the dreams of his two fellow inmates, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker (Gen. 40:1-41:13; for a hermeneutical exegesis as well as a psychological look at the two dream narratives, see Lu, 2016). The current paper responds to Philo of Alexandria's connotations on the dream of the chief cupbearer by examining, from an archaeological and linguistic point of view, the replacement of the term "cupbearer" by "eunuch" in the biblical source (as represented by the Septuagint and the Hebrew text).

## 1. Cupbearers in the Hebrew canon and ancient world

The word "cupbearer" (Heb. *mašqêh*), literally "one who gives (someone) something to drink", occurs 12 times in the Old Testament, among which 9 times are in the dream narratives in the Joseph story (Gen. 40:1, 2, 5, 9, 13, 20-21, 23; 41:9), 2 times referring to Solomon's attendants (1 Kgs. 10:5 = 2 Chron. 9:4), and 1 time in Nehemiah 1:11. In the narrative of Joseph, the "butler" (e.g., the Authorized KJV translation) was literally a cupbearer. As one of Pharaoh's servants, who sees the king's face (cf., 2 Sam. 14:24ff.; Esth. 1:14; Jer. 52:25), he could put forward suggestions for Pharaoh (Gen. 41:9-13; cf., 2 Sam. 12:1ff.; 1 Kgs. 21:3ff.). In 1 Kings 10:5 and 2 Chronicles 9:4, the word "cupbearers" (Heb. *mašqāw*) may possibly refer to these who were among many possessions of King Solomon or to only the drinking service of Solomon (i.e., decanters, cups; cf., de

Vaux, 1997, p. 122). These cupbearers amazed the queen of Sheba so much that "she was overwhelmed". As one of royal cupbearers (the absence of the definite article may indicate more than one cupbearer) closest to Artaxerxes I., King of Persia, Nehemiah serves at the king's table and has great influence as a friend of the king. Nehemiah, though a Jewish foreigner in Persia, nevertheless upholds a position of honour and of trustfulness (cf., Yamauchi, 1980).

Besides, in the narrative of Sennacherib the king of Assyria (2 Kgs. 18:17ff.), he sends *tartān* (rather, the ordinary title of an Assyrian general; a word of Sumerian origin; cf., Isa. 20:1), *rab-sārīs* (rather, the chief eunuch or courtier; cf., Jer. 39:3, 13), and *rab-šāqêh* (rather, the chief field commander; in the parallel of Isa. 36:2ff., only *rab-šāqêh* is sent) to expedite into Jerusalem against Hezekiah the king of Israel. As a Hebraised form of the Assyrian word *rab-šāq*, the compound term *rab-šāqêh* also signifies the title of the chief cupbearer or the chief spokesman according to HALOT (Koehler, Baumgartner, Richardson, & Stamm, 2000). Such titles may have been preserved and attached to superior military officers, when the duties from which they originally had have been suspended to perform, and others have been imposed in them. In Ecclesiastes 2:8, the Septuagint takes a meaning from the Aramaic root, "to pour out (wine)", translating an uncertain Hebrew phrase *wāšārōwī wəta'ānūgōt* as (possibly a female) "cupbearer" (see Pietersma & Wright, 2007, p. 651). This uncertain phrase, however, has been translated as the word "harem", an obscure term which occurs only here and is usually considered as a designation for concubines, in such as the New International Version. In Tobit, it is said that Esarhaddon's cupbearer, Achicharos, was second only to his kingdom (1:22).

In ancient East, the great monarchies had a court of household servants (1 Kgs. 10:4-5), such as cupbearers, bakers, and carvers, who were in charge of the king's table. As an important official closest to a king, who feared intrigue and the possibility of poisoned food, a cupbearer was required to be a man of irreproachable loyalty capable of winning the king's unreserved trust (cf., Mills, 1990, p. 188). Specifically, the Egyptian cupbearer was a high-ranking royal official who, as described in the Papyrus Leiden 348, "tasted the wine" (cf., Vergote, 1959, pp. 35-37). Moreover,

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the Egyptian royal cupbearer was titled, as engraved in the brick UC69964 and other objects from the New Kingdom (1550-1070 B.C.), “the chief of the pure-priests”, “the guardian of the temple”, and “the overseer of the *šn<sup>c</sup>*” of a great enchantress called Werethekau (the *šn<sup>c</sup>* was a production centre in the architecture of the temple in the New Kingdom; for more details, see Ouda, 2015, pp. 361-364).

## 2. Philo on the chief cupbearer’s dream

Philo of Alexandria (ca. 25 B.C.–ca. A.D. 50) was a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher who wrote a prolific series of works on moral theology, interpreting the Scriptures for his fellow citizens in the diaspora. His *De Somniis* (*On Dreams*) and *Legum Allegoriarum* (*Allegorical Interpretation*), together with the pericopes on St. Paul’s visions (Acts 9:3-8, 10-16; 16:9-10; 18:9-10; 23:11; 27:23-25; 2 Cor. 12:1-10) and other eminent treatises of Philo’s contemporaries (esp., *Interpretation of Dreams* [s.v., Antiphon]; cf., Gagarin, 2002, pp. 93-102), show us the manner in which the school of the first-century Pythagoreans and Sophists sought to appropriate allegorical interpretations of dreams (visions) by their epistemological metaphors. Compared with the other aspects of Philo’s treatises, his approach to dream interpretations has been received much less attention. Specifically, the *De Somniis*, which is composed of three extant books (I, II, and a lost one), allegorically elucidates the dreams in Genesis 28 (Jacob’s dream of the ladder; cf., Kugel, 1995; Yli-Karjanmaa, 2008), 31 (Jacob’s dream of the rams and the ewes), 37 (Joseph’s dreams of the harvest and the starry galaxy; cf., Bassler, 1985; Begg, 2010; Reddoch, 2011), 40 (the dreams of Pharaoh’s chief cupbearer and chief baker; cf., Lu, 2016), and 41 (Pharaoh’s dreams of the seven cows and the seven heads of grain). Accordingly, Philo classifies dreams into three-fold types (cf., Dodson, 2003; Tovar, 2003, 2014):

1. In the first species of dreams, “the Deity sent the appearances which are beheld by man in dreams in accordance with the suggestions of his own nature” (*Somn.* I.1; cf., also *ibid.* II.1; the quotation is from Yonge translation, 2017, and so subsequently, with occasional verbal changes). The dreams (visions) signify the appearance of the LORD to, for example, Isaac (Gen. 26:2-5, 24), Jacob (Gen. 28:12-15), Laban (Gen. 31:24), Saul (Acts 9:3-6), and Ananias (Acts 9:10-16). Among others, Philo praises Jacob’s austerity when sleeping on a rock (see *Somn.* I.2-3; 16; 183-199; cf., Gen. 28:11, 17-19), as well as the command that “now see to it that you drink no wine or other fermented drink” (Judg. 13:4) to Manoah’s wife by the angel of the Lord.
2. In the second species of dreams, “our mind, being moved simultaneously with the mind of the universe, has appeared to be hurried away by itself and to be under the influence of divine impulses, so as to be rendered capable of comprehending beforehand, and knowing by anticipation some of the events of the future” (*Somn.* I.2; cf., also *ibid.* II.2, 18). The dreams (visions) shed light on the angles or intermediate souls who either motivate Jacob (Gen. 31:10-16) the patriarch and his son Joseph (Gen. 37:5-11), or Moses, Aaron, and Miriam the prophets (Num. 12:4-6), or Pharaoh the king of Egypt (Gen. 41:1-7) and Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon (Dan. 4:10-18).

3. The third species of dreams exists, “whenever in sleep the mind being set in motion by itself, and agitating itself, is filled with frenzy and inspiration, so as to predict future events by a certain prophetic power” (*Somn.* II.2). The dreams are from the soul of the sleeper and self-activating, occur to ordinary recipients without any intervention of deity, and refer to, in the Bible, the dreams of Pharaoh’s chief cupbearer and chief baker (Gen. 40:5-19) and Pilate’s wife (Matt. 27:19).

Surprisingly, the Stoic ideologies of Philo on dreams have not yet attracted psychologists’ attention, especially taking into account the fact that Freudian or Jungian analyses in the representational bases for latent contents or archetypes in dream symbolism, respectively, also analogise dream pictures with strictly mythological motifs (e.g., Dionysian goat, monster, serpent, wine; cf., Freud, 1955; Jung, 1938, 1968). Actually, a common tendency of both Philonic metaphors and Freudian and Jungian views on dreams has been to attempt to bridge the Greek philosophy and mythology with the biblical stories. For example, Philo symbolised the oracle of an undying evil Scylla as Cain (see *Deter.* 40), Zillah (Gen. 4:19) as Delphi (see *Post.* 113), and Jethro the priest of Midian (Exod. 3:1; 18:1ff.) as Egyptian Proteus (*Ebr.* 10, 36), while Jung represented a divine Apokatastasis as God the Redeemer (Jung, 1968, pp. 60-61), as well as the ancient Pharaohs as eaters of gods (Jung, 1976, p. 42). This conscious effort to interpret the Scriptures in terms of Greek philosophy and mythology (and occasionally Egyptian mythology for Philo; see *Decal.* 16, 76; *Spec.* I.79; *Migr.* 14, 76) was peculiarly eligible for Philo due to the fact that he used not the original Hebrew but the Greek translation of the Pentateuch and, as such, the wording of that translation might affect his exegeses. Moreover, Philo argues that a scriptural story is different from a Greek myth. The former is literally true and maintains “symbols of some secret meaning of nature” (*Cont.* 28), which can be elucidated by the allegorical method. This method extracts the allegory that is “in the nature which loves to hide itself” (*Fug.* 179) and that “exhibits a nature which is not so evident to the multitude” (*Abr.* 200). In contrast, the latter neither is a literal, historically true event, nor has an underlying meaning.

For Philo, wine and breads could be interpreted as complementary symbols both for nourishment of drink and food, which can be either negative (see *Ebr.* 4, 11, 22, 29, 95, 104, 122-123, 127-128, 130-131, 148; cf., *Somn.* I.122; II.156-157, 200-205) or positive (see *Somn.* I.126; also *ibid.* II.48-52; cf., *Leg. All.* III.81-82, 155, 251) depending on its connotation. For example, Philo sheds light on Jesus’ role as Logos the “cupbearer” (see *Somn.* II.190, 248-249; cf., John 2:1-11) and on his incarnate blood connecting to the Eucharistic wine (Jn. 6:53-56; cf., *ibid.* 15:1-8). In contrast, Philo associates the grapes in the dream narrative of the chief cupbearer, which he squeezes them into wine and then delivers it into Pharaoh’s hand (Gen. 40:10), with the gluttony of drunkenness, thus considering (1) the dream ultimately as an allegory for darkness, folly, perishableness, and thoughtlessness (see *Ebr.* 50; *Somn.* II.159-160, 203), and (2) the soul of the chief cupbearer is asleep without moving along with the deity (see *Somn.* II.160-162).

Specifically, Philo differentiates Pharaoh, whose soul is conjunct with intemperance and incontinence (see *Ebr.* 51:210), from God (cf., *Somn.* II.165, 183, 192, 200, 203, 213). Likewise, Philo distinguishes King Melchizedek the

priest of God Most High (cf., Gen. 14:18), who brings out bread and wine for Abraham (Gen. 14:18), as *logos* (i.e., God's utterances) the priest of God (see *Leg. All.* III.25, 79, 82), from the chief cupbearer, who is absolutely committed to Pharaoh's eunuch, Potiphar, in prison (see *Ebr.* 211), as the high priest of Pharaoh. The former serves God, who is completely without passion and pours a purely nourishing drink, whereas the latter serves one who is an offshoot of passion and intemperate against the soul, lacks self-mastery, and disperses destruction (see *Ebr.* 210-211; cf., "the heavenly nourishment", Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* VII.41:3). It is also noteworthy that Philo interprets the chief baker as not being in the position equivalent to that of the chief cupbearer; instead, Philo explicitly accounts for the chief baker as just an attendant of Pharaoh (see *Somn.* II.210).

Moreover, Philo regards the chief cupbearer as a eunuch (see *Ebr.* 210-211, 220, 224; *Somn.* II.195), who shall not enter into the assembly of the Lord (*Ebr.* 213; cf., Deuteronomy 23:1) and represents the licentiousness and effeminacy. Thus, for the dream narrative of the chief cupbearer, Philo analogically considers that (1) the "grapes are the grapes of gall", (2) the "branches are full of bitterness", (3) the "vine is of the vine of Sodom", (4) the "tendrils are of the vine of Gomorrah", (5) the "wine is the madness of dragons and the incurable fury of Asps" (*Somn.* II.191; cf., *Ebr.* 222), and (6) accordingly, the chief cupbearer himself is sterile and unproductive of wisdom (see *Ebr.* 211-212; cf., *Somn.* II.184-189). Philo's this enunciation is associated with a Greek mythology on Demeter (Roman equivalent Ceres), such that male prostitutes, he says, some of them eunuchs, are seen "continually strutting through the market place at midday, and leading the processions in festivals; and impious men as they are, having received by lot the charge of the temple, and beginning the sacred and initiating rites, and concerned even in the holy mysteries of Ceres" (*Spec.* III.40). As a result, Philo regards the chief cupbearer's dream narrative as negative, since it does not simply prepare for austere, necessarily nourishing way of life intending for basic body strength and well-being needs, but it associates with indulgence in pleasure and enjoyment (see *Ebr.* 214-219; cf., *Somn.* II.48-51, 155-163; cf., *Sobr.* 1-2 for Philo's criticism on the Noah's drunkenness narrative in Gen. 9:20-27).

### 3. Other allegorical exegeses on the chief cupbearer's dream

Among Jacob, Joseph, and Daniel, the mere three men who both recount and are given the ability to interpret symbolic dreams in the Bible, Joseph is, Philo says, the only "man who is at the same time initiated and also an interpreter of the mysteries of dreams" (*Somn.* II.78). Moreover, only the Joseph's dreams are characterized by the allegories of metaphor exempt from any divine element (Gen. 37:5-11). This kind of dreams, which is, according to the Philo's classification, the second species, is rarely depicted in the Scriptures. Psychology's specific interest in terms of the value of the Joseph's dream narratives is in discerning the revelatory dimension of dreams as avenues into an explanatory model, which, to date, has not been put forward and might be useful for further spiritual interpretations.

The construction which Joseph places upon the dream of Pharaoh's chief cupbearer furnishes an allegorical exege-

sis. The three branches, after which comes the blossom, cluster, and ripeness of the grapes turning into the cup of wine, are a symbolic substitute for three days, which are, according to the prediction, the time for the chief cupbearer to successfully restore to his former rank in Pharaoh's "great house" (Gen. 40:9-13). Afterwards, it is demonstrated as a remembrance for the chief cupbearer, who witnesses the completion of Joseph's interpretations of his own as well as his fellow chief baker's dreams in prison, after his reinstatement. It is the chief cupbearer whom Joseph asks to intercede with Pharaoh, by means of which Joseph is then recommended as a godsent dream interpreter for Pharaoh's dreams (Gen. 40:14). Leeming and Marlan (2010, p. 252) elucidated that the restoration of the chief cupbearer could connote a metaphor for a symbol of the self (Matt. 7:24ff.) and for a renewal of the flow of wine, a necessary rejuvenation of spirit and consciousness from Pharaoh's troubled spirit (Gen. 41:8).

From an allegorical, sequentially hypertextual perspective, Adamczewski (2012, pp. 147-148) argues, on the one hand, that the chief cupbearer's offering of the first fruits of a vine to Pharaoh can also illustrate the Deuteronomic idea in terms of bringing the first fruits of Canaan to God (Deut. 26:1-11; esp., 26:10). On the other hand, the additional motif of the third day can allude to the related Deuteronomic instruction pertaining to give a tithe in the third year (Deut. 26:12). Nevertheless, the fact that the chief cupbearer forgets Joseph in jail may negatively allude to the idea that the Israelites, while paying their tithes, should not forget the Levites, resident aliens, orphans, and widows. However, it is worth noting that dreaming per se is regarded, either from Aristotle's or Freud's point of view, as stemming from a "daemonic" power (see *Somn. et Vig.* 463b11-15, 463b12-14; Freud, 1955, p. 609; cf., Lu, 2019 for a succinct study on demonic dreams).

### 4. Pharaoh's chief cupbearer was a eunuch?

In fact, there is very little evidence to support the possibility that Pharaoh's chief cupbearer was a eunuch. First, the Hebrew text does not call him a eunuch. The Hebrew word "eunuch", *sārîs* (e.g., 1 Sam. 8:15; 1 Kgs. 22:9 = 2 Chron. 18:8; 2 Kgs. 8:6; 9:32; 20:18; 23:11; 24:12; 25:19; Esth. 1 and 2, *passim*; Isa. 39:7; 56:3, 5; Jer. 29:2; 52:25; Dan. 1:7), is probably an Akkadian loanword from *saresi*, which means, translated literally, "he at the head", or simply a courtier or officer, who may or may not have been emasculated. For example, the Bible refers the title *sārîs* to the commander-in-chief of Sennacherib (2 Kgs. 18:17) and Nergal-Sharezer the high official (Jer. 39:3, 13; cf., Mykytiuk, 2016), both of whom were the princes of Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon and lead military corps. Historically, there were indeed occasions that eunuchs have not only served in the military, but also were general officers (e.g., Tong Guan in the Song Dynasty of China; Ganymedes in the Ptolemaic Dynasty of Egypt). However, there was no evidence in the Old Babylonian era that powerful captains of the guards were eunuchs (cf., Brinkman 1968, pp. 309-311 for a general discussion on this "eunuch or not" issue among the royal officials in Babylonia). Likewise, it appears that even though given the title *sārîs*, it is more than likely that Pharaoh's chief cupbearer is closely associated with the *saresi*.

Second, there is no clear evidence for the existence of castrated officials in ancient Egypt (Cornelius, 2009; Dalley, 2002; cf., Redford, 2014, p. 201). It must be noted that

some scholars argued that the courtiers and officers who came in contact with the king's harem or the royal children were usually eunuchs because the king used also emasculated men in maintaining his private harem (e.g., Fensham, 1982, p. 157; Grayson, 1995, p. 97; Mills, 1990, p. 271). Despite this, the relevant assertion of a connection between royal attendants and castrated court eunuchs in ancient Egypt is not as concrete as that often indicated in Assyria (Peled, 2013; Siddall, 2007), as evidenced by scarce Egyptian sources (for a critical analysis on whether Nehemiah was a eunuch, see Yamauchi, 1980).

Third, although the Septuagint presents the chief cupbearer (Greek *αρχηγός*) as well as the chief baker as eunuchs (Gen. 40:2, 7), it might also be possible that *οἰνοχόος*, "cupbearer", was mistakenly translated as *εὐνούχος*, "eunuch". Another such disputable example in the Bible is Potiphar, a married man and "an officer of Pharaoh, captain of the guard, an Egyptian" (Gen. 37:36, 39:1, the Authorized KJV translation), which is, however, translated as "the eunuch of Pharaoh" (Gen. 39:1) in the Septuagint (see Pietersma, 2007, p. 33).

### Concluding remarks

The apocalyptic interpretation of the dream of Pharaoh's chief cupbearer indicates that the incident with the cupbearer is used as the release of Joseph for the freedom from his confinement. Although Philo's tractates *De Ebrietate* and *De Somniis* argumentatively and persuasively depict this dream narrative as negative, the present paper shows that it remains especially debatable for his elucidation of the chief cupbearer as a eunuch. It is, therefore, argued that there is weak evidence to connote Pharaoh's chief cupbearer and his dream negatively. Instead, the chief cupbearer and his dream narrative, along with all the other cupbearers (e.g., Solomon's attendants, Nehemiah, the Lord the "cupbearer") in the Bible, might be considered to be positive.

### Appendix: Abbreviations of works cited

#### A1. Philo's works

*Abr.* = *De Abrahamo (On Abraham)*.  
*Cont.* = *De Vita Contemplativa (On the Contemplative Life)*.  
*Decal.* = *De Decalogo (On Decalogue)*.  
*Deter.* = *Quod Deterius Potiori Insidiari Soleat (That the Worse Is Wont to Attack the Better)*.  
*Ebr.* = *De Ebrietate (On Drunkenness)*.  
*Fug.* = *De Fuga et Inventione (On Flight and Finding)*.  
*Leg. All.* = *Legum Allegoriarum (Allegorical Interpretation)*.  
*Migr.* = *De Migratione Abrahami (On the Migration of Abraham)*.  
*Post.* = *De Posteritate Caini (On the Posterity of Cain)*.  
*Sobr.* = *De Sobrietate (on Sobriety)*.  
*Somn.* = *De Somniis (On Dreams)*.  
*Spec.* = *De Specialibus Legibus (The Special Laws)*.

#### A2. The Bible

Gen. = Genesis.  
 Exod. = Exodus.  
 Num. = Numbers.  
 Deut. = Deuteronomy.  
 Judg. = Judges.  
 1-2 Sam. = 1-2 Samuels.

1-2 Kgs. = 1-2 Kings.  
 2 Chron. = 2 Chronicles.  
 Esth. = Esther.  
 Isa. = Isaiah.  
 Jer. = Jeremiah.  
 Dan. = Daniel.  
 Matt. = Matthew.  
 Jn. = John.  
 2 Cor. = 2 Corinthians.

#### A3. Others

*Somn. et Vig.* = *De Somno et Vigilia (On Sleep and Waking)*, by Aristotle.  
*Strom.* = *Stromata (Miscellanies)*, by Clement of Alexandria.

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