

Joseph in Egypt

Part 1: The Historical Background

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No portion of the Old Testament has a richer Egyptian coloring than the Story of Joseph. Egyptian names, titles, places, and customs all appear in Genesis 37-50. In the last one hundred years or so, historical and archaeological research has made the study of the Egyptian elements in the Joseph Story more fruitful than ever before. In order to examine the Egyptological information, it is necessary to establish the period in Egyptian history when Joseph was in Egypt.

Mainline contemporary scholarship and the Bible's own chronology are in accord in dating Joseph sometime between 2000 and 1600 B.C. This time frame includes two important periods of Egypt's history, the Middle Kingdom (2000-1786 B.C.) and the Second Intermediate Period (1786-1570 B.C.). Before narrowing down our dates for Joseph any more, let us first survey these two periods.

The Middle Kingdom was one of Egypt's three greatest ages.¹ The country was unified and prosperous, and was in the process of conquering Nubia.² The eight Pharaohs of this period

¹ See William C. Hayes, The Middle Kingdom of Egypt (New York: Cambridge University, 1964), pp 34ff, and C. F. Aling, Egypt and Bible History (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1981).

comprise Egypt's Twelfth Dynasty . The founder was the great Amenemhat I (1991-1962 B.C.). He died by assassination, but not before he had associated his son Sesostri I with him on the throne as co-regent. Sesostri, in his long reign (1971-1928), campaigned with success in northern Nubia and built at no less than thirty-five sites in Egypt. Under his immediate successors, fighting in Nubia subsided and trade received the main royal attentions. Since Babylon had not yet emerged as a great power under Hammurabi, Egypt stood alone as the world's greatest nation.

The most important king of the Twelfth Dynasty was Sesostri III (1878-1843 B.C.). He renewed the efforts to conquer Nubia, and was successful. All of Nubia, as far south as Semnah, was taken. Sesostri III also instituted great administrative reforms. He broke the power of the local nobility. These officials had been a thorn in the side of the Pharaohs all through the Twelfth Dynasty. We know little in detail of what Sesostri III did, but he did end the semi-independence of the so-called Nomarchs (provincial governors). We will have occasion to return to this point later.

Under Amenemhat III (1842-1797 B.C.), the Middle Kingdom reached its highest level of material prosperity. Egypt was very successful in foreign trade. The exploitation of mines

The other two great periods of Egyptian history were the Old Kingdom (2800-2200 B.C.) and the New Kingdom (1570- 985 B.C.).

² Ancient Nubia was located in what is today the Sudan. In the Bible this area is called Ethiopia.

and quarries was greater than ever before, and a project to reclaim land in the Fayum region to the west of the Nile valley was completed. The final rulers of the Twelfth Dynasty (including one female king) were weak. As central authority broke down, so did control of Egypt's borders with Syria-Palestine. This enabled an ever-expanding infiltration of Asiatics to enter Egypt's delta region. Eventually these Asiatics were able to seize control of northern Egypt, thus ending the Middle Kingdom period of Egyptian history.

The Second Intermediate Period, or as it is sometimes called, "The Hyksos Period," was not a time of greatness for Egypt. The north was controlled by Asiatics, called the Hyksos by the Egyptians. The south was ruled by local Egyptian dynasts of no great power or importance, at least in their early years.³

A few comments on the Hyksos are necessary here. There are several wrong views concerning them which have become popularly held. The first is that they entered Egypt by means of a massive military invasion led by chariots. While the Hyksos probably did introduce the war chariot to Egypt, they most certainly did not enter the country and conquer it in a military campaign. They entered the Nile delta gradually and, finding themselves there in sufficient numbers to do so, simply established one of their leaders as an Egyptian-style Pharaoh.

³The best study of the Hyksos is John Van Seters, The Hyksos (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966).

They resided in a capital city called Avaris; later in Egyptian history this city would be re-named “Ramses” after the great king Ramses II (1279-1213 B.C.).

Another misconception about the Hyksos concerns their name. Josephus, a Jewish historian writing in the first century A.D. during the days of the great Jewish Revolt against the Roman Empire and Rome’s armies led by Vespasian, said that the term “Hyksos” meant “Shepherd Kings.” This is of course quite wrong. The name Hyksos comes from two Egyptian words meaning “Rulers of Foreign Lands,” and has nothing at all to do with shepherds. A final incorrect idea regarding the Hyksos is that they ruled all of Egypt. They did not. They only controlled the delta region.

During which of these two periods of time did Joseph come to Egypt as a slave? It has become fashionable among scholars to date him to the Hyksos period, since it is generally assumed that the Israelites were fellow Asiatics related to the Hyksos. It is also assumed that, since Joseph eventually rose to a high position in the Egyptian court, the king must have been a fellow countryman of Joseph’s. If we allow for a sojourn of some 400 years in Egypt by the Israelites, and if we accept the so-called Late Date of the Exodus (in the middle 1200’s B.C.), a date for Joseph around 1650 B.C. would be perfect.

The Bible, on the other hand, provides us with some very specific Chronological data regarding these events. I Kings 6:1, a pivotal reference for all Old Testament chronology, dates

the Exodus 480 years before the fourth year of Solomon, accepted by virtually all scholars as 966 B.C. This places the Exodus in ca. 1446 B.C. a date which agrees with the so-called Early Date for the Exodus. Next, Exodus 12:40 states that Jacob came to dwell in Egypt 430 years before the Exodus. Thus he came to Egypt in 1876 B.C. These Biblical references clearly show that Joseph ought to be dated in the Middle Kingdom rather than in the Hyksos Period.

Several specific points in the Joseph Story confirm a Middle Kingdom rather than a Hyksos date for Joseph. In Gen. 41:14 Joseph is called out of prison to meet with the king. Before going to meet the king, Joseph puts on new (clean) clothing and shaves himself. This becomes understandable when we realize that the Egyptians were a clean people and were particularly offended by facial hair. This verse points to the Pharaoh being a native Egyptian, and not Hyksos. The latter, being Asiatics, were not bothered by facial hair and a general lack of cleanliness. When Joseph is rewarded and promoted by the Pharaoh for interpreting the king's dream, he is named to be ruler over all the land of Egypt (see Gen. 41). The Hyksos never ruled all the land of Egypt, but the native Egyptian Pharaoh's of the Middle Kingdom did. Also, when Joseph is given a wife by the king as a reward for his interpretation of the dream, the woman is said to be the daughter of Potiphara, Priest of On. On was the center of solar worship in ancient Egypt. The chief god worshipped there was Re or Ra, the northern manifestation of Amon-Re, the supreme deity of both the Middle Kingdom and New Kingdom periods of Egyptian history. The Hyksos, while they did not persecute the worshippers of Re, did not give that deity the

number one position. Their favorite deity was Set, a delta god sometimes regarded by the Egyptians as nearly a devil-like figure. The Hyksos identified Set with the Palestinian god Baal, a god from their Syrian homeland who was very familiar to them. Now if Joseph was being rewarded by a Hyksos king, it stands to reason that his new wife would not have been the daughter of a priest of Re, but rather the daughter of a priest of Set. Once again, the Middle Kingdom seems a better choice for dating Joseph than the Second Intermediate Period. Thus, relying on the Biblical chronology and the historical material, we will place Joseph in the Middle Kingdom period, under two great rulers, Sesostris II (1897-1878 B.C.) and Sesostris III (1878-1843 B.C.).

Joseph entered Egypt as a slave. It is interesting to note that slavery was not a very old concept in Egypt. It had not existed earlier in the Old Kingdom, the period when the largest pyramids were being built. Those structures were not, as is sometimes stated, built by slave labor. They were constructed by drafted peasant labor. The Middle Kingdom is the first major period in Egyptian history where slavery was well known. In the 1950's A.D., the American Egyptologist William C. Hayes published a famous papyrus document from the Middle Kingdom which had a list of slaves on one side and a discussion of Egyptian prisons on the

other.⁴ **In the next part of this series, we will examine the information this valuable papyrus provides for us regarding the Story of Joseph.**

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Part II: Joseph the Slave

Joseph began life in Egypt as a slave (Gen. 39:1). As we saw in Part I of this study, these events in the life of Joseph should be dated to the great Middle Kingdom period of Egyptian history (2000-1782 B.C.). It is important to note that during the Middle Kingdom, slavery as an institution of society flourished in Egypt. Evidence from Egyptian texts indicates that at this time in Egypt's history the number of Syro-Palestinian slaves in bondage in the Nile Valley was growing constantly.⁵ While some of these Asiatic slaves must have been prisoners of war captured by the Egyptian army in raids to the north, the majority certainly were not obtained by violence.⁶ Most of the slaves were female; prisoners of war would have been predominantly male. Also, there are no Egyptian records of any major wars being fought by Egypt in Syria-Palestine in the Middle Kingdom. It is best to conclude that most of the Asiatic slaves entered

⁴William C. Hayes, ed., A Papyrus of the Late Middle Kingdom in the Brooklyn Museum (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum Reprint, 1972).

⁵ See Charles F. Aling, Egypt and Bible History (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981, p. 30, note 14.

⁶Aling, p. 30.

Egypt just as Joseph did, through the slave trade. This, however, brings up an interesting question. Why is there no written evidence at all of a slave trade between Syria-Palestine and Egypt?

First, let it be said that dismissing something on the basis of a lack of evidence is a dangerous business. Today, we have very few of the written documents composed in the Ancient Near East. What we have reflects accidental preservation. And, when we realize that the slave trade would have been centered in the Nile Delta (northern Egypt), accidental preservation becomes even less likely due to the high water table there. Very few papyrus documents have been recovered from that region, especially from the earlier periods of Egyptian history. Also, the slave trade would have been in all probability in private hands rather than under government control. This would have made preservation of documentary evidence even more remote. Lastly, it is very possible that the slave trade would have been in the hands of foreigners rather than Egyptians, as the Bible implies is the case of Joseph. Records, in so far as they were kept at all, would thus not be kept by Egyptians but by the Asiatics who were selling other Asiatic men and women to the Egyptians.

We are fortunate to have a papyrus from the Middle Kingdom was studied and published some years ago by the American Egyptologist William C. Hayes.⁷ The verso side deals with

⁷William C. Hayes, ed., A Papyrus of the Late Middle Kingdom in the Brooklyn Museum (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum Reprint, 1972).

slaves and the reverse side contains a discussion of Egyptian prisons, another topic of vital importance for the Joseph Story. But this papyrus' main significance lies in its list of Middle Kingdom slaves, with names, nationality and titles or jobs held by these slaves. The list contains 95 entries. Of the 95 slaves listed, about thirty can be identified as non-Egyptian, either by their non-Egyptian names or by the designation Aamu, meaning an Asiatic.⁸ Two things of great interest emerge from a study of the Asiatic slaves on this list. First, the names are very significant to the student of the Bible. Several of them are either identical to or very similar to some names familiar to us from the Old Testament itself. A female version of the Hebrew name Menahem is present; Sk-ra-tw, also the name of a woman, is paralleled by the Hebrew name Issachar; Ashra is most certainly the feminine version of Asher; and Shepra is known to us in the Old Testament as Shiphrah, the Hebrew midwife in the Book of Exodus.⁹ Secondly, the duties assigned to the Asiatic slaves in our list provide some important correlations to Joseph's career. The kinds of jobs performed by the Asiatic slaves are generally less onerous than those assigned to native Egyptian slaves, and are in fact classifiable as skilled labor.¹⁰ Let us examine some of the titles held by the Asiatic slaves.

⁸Hayes, p. 92. Hayes based his interpretation of these Syrian or Asiatic names on the work of W.F. Albright.

⁹Hayes, pp. 95-96.

¹⁰Hayes, p. 93.

One of the most common titles held by male Asiatic slaves was that of “Household Servant.”¹¹ This is not only a confirmation of the accuracy of Scripture, which assigns this title to Joseph (Gen. 39:2), but also helps us to get a better idea of what kinds of work Joseph would have been involved in while a slave of Potiphar. When we examine Egyptian monuments that picture or discuss Household Servants, we find that such slaves performed the normal kinds of tasks we would expect. For example, they are often shown in tomb paintings bringing food and drink to their masters.¹² An Asiatic slave could also be a cook, a teacher, or a brewer.¹³

A final fact to note from Hayes’ papyrus is that slaves in the Middle Kingdom were commonly owned by private individuals. It has always been known that the governments of the Near East were owners of large numbers of slaves, many of whom would have been used in the vast construction projects of the state such as temple building, palace repair, and the construction of fortifications. It may be assumed that slaves would also have been employed as laborers on both the large agricultural estates of the king and of the temples. But here, in the Papyrus published by Hayes, we have evidence that officials of wealth and standing could own slaves.¹⁴ The Potiphar of Genesis must have been such a man.

¹¹ Hayes, pp. 103 ff.

¹² Hayes, p. 104.

¹³ Aling, p. 35.

¹⁴ Hayes, p. 134.

Joseph's entire life and career were indeed remarkable. As the Bible repeats again and again, the Lord was with Joseph and blessed what he did. God's blessing was in fact so obvious that Joseph's Egyptian masters were able to recognize it! (Genesis 39:3). We find in Gen. 39:4 that Potiphar, Joseph's first Egyptian master, promoted Joseph from being merely a Household Servant to become his Steward the one over his household. What did this entail?

From the far better documented New Kingdom period of Egyptian history (1570-1085 B.C.), we have information on the duties of the Steward.¹⁵ Under Mery, the High Priest of the god Amon under King Amenhotep II, a man named Djehuty served as Steward. Two of his subsidiary titles were "Scribe of Offerings" and "Chief of Agricultural slaves." The first proves that he was literate, and the second shows us his primary duty, the supervision of his master's agricultural estates. Several other Stewards known from New Kingdom times had the same titles. This indicates two things about Joseph. First, he was literate. He would have to be to hold a Stewardship. How and when he learned to read and write the complex Egyptian language is not known. Perhaps it was when he was a Household Servant of Potiphar. In any case, we may assume that Joseph was a quick and diligent student. Secondly, as a Steward, Joseph would have been in charge of the agricultural holdings of his master, Potiphar. We should remember that ancient Egypt did not have a money economy as we know it today, and officials such as Potiphar would have been paid for their work by being allowed the use or ownership of farm

¹⁵ See Aling, pp. 35-36 for references.

lands. Potiphar would not have the time or perhaps even the skills to supervise the land and its cultivation himself; hence the necessity for a Steward. We remember too that Joseph came from an agricultural family, and presumably already had extensive knowledge of farming techniques and farm animals.

From a practical point of view, there are two reasons why it is important for the modern student of the Bible to realize all this about Joseph. First, through a knowledge of what an Egyptian Steward did, we can see the accuracy of the Book of Genesis even in minute details. Note for example Gen. 39:5. At the end of this verse, we are told that Potiphar's holdings were blessed for Joseph's sake, both in the house and in the field. When we understand that Joseph was a Steward, and when we learn what kinds of things a Steward did in both the house and the field, we have a far clearer appreciation of this verse and what it is telling us. Second, when we see that Joseph was an Egyptian Steward, we see him getting the kind of on-the-job training he would need for the ultimate task God had for him, the task of preserving the people of Israel during the coming time of great famine. **As we will see, Joseph will eventually become the head of agriculture for the entire land of Egypt. Under Potiphar, he received vital experience on a smaller scale for the far greater responsibility he will have later. He was faithful over a small job; God would therefore give him a more important one.**

In our next article, we will find Joseph in prison. This same papyrus published by Hayes will give us much information on this aspect of the life of Joseph.

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Part III: Joseph in Prison

As all who are familiar with the Biblical account will remember, Joseph while still in the household of Potiphar was falsely accused of adultery with the wife of his master and was thrown into prison. The normal punishment for adultery in ancient Egypt was death; the fact that Joseph did not suffer execution is interesting and perhaps indicates that Potiphar doubted the veracity of his wife, who had made the accusation. In any case, Joseph did spend time in an Egyptian prison.

The Biblical mention of Joseph's serving time in a prison is noteworthy in itself. To us in the twentieth century, serving time in a prison seems quite natural, since such punishment is the normal thing in our society. But in the ancient world, this was not the case. **The death penalty, a fine, or even bodily mutilation was** the usual means of making people suffer for their crimes in the ancient Near East.

Prisons were rare in the ancient world. To see this, one need only look at the Old Testament Law. There is nothing there about serving a prison sentence for any sin or crime, and

in fact there is nothing biblically or archaeologically that would lead us to believe that the Hebrews even had prisons as we know of them today.¹⁶ The importance, then, of the prison sentence of Joseph is that the author of the Book of Genesis is recording correct information, for Egypt was one of the few nations in the ancient Near East that had prisons in the classical sense of the term.

We are very fortunate to have an Egyptian papyrus, translated and published by the Egyptologist W.C. Hayes, that deals at length with Egyptian prisons.¹⁷ **We have mentioned this remarkable document before in Part II of our study, since it also deals with Asiatic slaves in Middle Kingdom Egypt.** Let us look at what this papyrus tells us about prisons and prison life in Egypt in the days of Joseph.¹⁸

The main prison of Egypt was called the “Place of Confinement.” It was divided into two parts: a “cell-block” like a modern prison, and “a barracks” for holding a large number of prisoners who were forced into serving as laborers for the government. What kind of sentences were given to prisoners? We know little about specific sentencing procedures. It does not seem

¹⁶ The ancient Jews did use cistern wells as temporary “holding tanks” as the story of Jeremiah indicates in Jer. 38:6, but the ancient Jews did not have true prisons in the modern sense. Note that in Jer. 37:15 Jeremiah had earlier been placed in a private house which was converted into a temporary “jail” for Jeremiah. Clearly the ancient Jews did not have true prisons. However, note that the Story of Joseph clearly states that the Egyptians had true prisons, and the Hayes papyrus clearly proves that this was indeed the case.

¹⁷ William C. Hayes, ed., A Papyrus of the Late Middle Kingdom in the Brooklyn Museum (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum Reprint, 1972).

¹⁸ Our information is drawn from Hayes, pp. 37-42.

that criminals were given a number of years to serve in prison. Perhaps all sentences were life sentences. In any case, some of the prisoners in the Place of Confinement were “serving time” for their crimes, as Joseph presumably was. Other prisoners, however, were simply being held in prison awaiting the decision of the government as to what their punishment was to be. In other words, they were waiting to find out if they were going to be executed. This last category of people seems to be that of the two individuals Joseph met while in prison, the Butler and the Baker.

Who were the two individuals? We are never told their names or their crimes. The fact that one of them, the Baker, was eventually executed, and the other, the Butler, was restored to office, leads us to believe that they were accused of being involved in some kind of plot against the king. Such things happened in ancient Egypt. In such a case, once the king sorted out the facts, the guilty would be punished and the innocent would be exonerated. The Baker was executed (for treason) and the Butler was restored to his position. But what was that position?

We get the term Butler from the KJV translation of the Bible, and it brings to our minds the very British concept of a man in a tuxedo who answers doorbells and supervises household servants. This does not reflect the situation in the Joseph Story. The Hebrew title is “Cup

Bearer.”¹⁹ The duties of this personage involved providing beverages to the king (hence we see the importance of having someone trust-worthy on the job!).

Getting back to the prison itself, let us see what else the Hayes papyrus tells us about it. The main prison was located at Thebes (modern Luxor) in Upper Egypt, some 400 miles south of the Nile delta and modern Cairo. Assuming Joseph was there and not at some smaller prison (a correct assumption I believe since key royal officials were imprisoned there too), we see that the entire Joseph story cannot be confined to the delta area of the Niles as some scholars would have us believe.

As the Genesis account states, there was a “Warden” or “Overseer of the Prison,” who was assisted by a large staff of clerks and scribes. Record keeping at such an institution was as important to the ancient Egyptians as it is in a modern prison. The actual title Overseer of the Prison is not commonly found in Egyptian inscriptions, but examples do exist from the Middle Kingdom, the time of Joseph.

One of the chief assistants to the Warden or Overseer was the “Scribe of the Prison.” In Gen. 39:22 we are told that Joseph was promoted to high office in the Prison. Since Joseph was literate, as we have seen from the fact that he served as Steward in the household of Potiphar, it seems probable that he was promoted to Scribe of the Prison. As such, he would not only have

¹⁹ See J. Vergote, Joseph en Egypte (Louvain, 1959), p. 50, for a Middle Kingdom example.

been the right hand man of the Warden, but he would have also been in charge of all the records of the institution.

No matter how high in rank he became, Joseph would naturally have valued his personal freedom more than high office in the prison. When he interpreted the dream of the Cup Bearer as meaning that the Cup Bearer would be freed and restored to his post, Joseph implored that individual to remember him when he has the ear of Pharaoh. The Cup Bearer promises to do so, but quickly forgets Joseph when he assumes his old position again. It is only when Pharaoh himself dreams a dream that the Cup Bearer remembers the young Hebrew who could, through the power of God, interpret dreams. At that time, Joseph is called out of prison.

One final point needs to be noted. Joseph, before going to the king, has to change his clothing and shave. (Gen. 41:14). These are significant details. Native Egyptians were very concerned about personal cleanliness and the removal of all facial hair (the beards worn by kings were false beards.). If Joseph appeared before a Hyksos (i.e. non-Egyptian) Pharaoh, these factors would not have been so significant.²⁰ This verse, therefore, is further evidence that the Pharaoh of Joseph's day was Egyptian and not Hyksos, and that Joseph is correctly dated to the Middle Kingdom period.

²⁰ It is likely that the ancient Hyksos were Amorites, and we have ancient pieces of art indicating that the Amorites grew beards.

In our next article, we will examine Joseph's encounter with Pharaoh, a real turning point in the career of the Biblical Patriarch.

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Part IV: Joseph Before Pharaoh

In Genesis 41, Joseph meets the king of Egypt. **As we saw in our last article, he had been prepared for this encounter by being cleaned up and shaved, in true Egyptian fashion.** He was now ready to meet the most powerful and important man on earth. Before we consider this meeting, however, a word on the title Pharaoh is necessary. This term means literally "Great House," and refers to the palace establishment of Egypt. As the years passed, the title "Pharaoh" began to be used when speaking of the king, the main inhabitant of the palace and the head of the Egypt's government. If we date Joseph to the middle Kingdom period of Egyptian history, as I believe it is correct to do, an apparent problem arises. At this early stage of Egyptian history, the title Pharaoh was not used to refer to the king in direct address; such use begins only in Egypt's powerful Eighteenth Dynasty in about 1400 B.C., some three hundred years after the time of Joseph. We must remember, however, that Joseph did not write the account we have in Genesis; Moses did. Moses of course lived much later than Joseph, in about 1400 B.C. During his time, the title Pharaoh was beginning to be used as a form of direct address for the king of Egypt. It is important to note that Moses does not use Pharaoh followed by a proper name. That practice

was only instituted in the late period of Egyptian history, as is correctly reflected in Jeremiah 44:30, where “Pharaoh Hophra” is mentioned.

But let us turn to the events surrounding the actual meeting between Joseph and the king, most probably Sesostris II of Dynasty Twelve. As all of us will recall from our own study of the Scriptures, Pharaoh had had a dream. His magicians (the Hebrew in Gen. 41 is an accurate translation of the Egyptian word for a magician) could not tell the meaning of his dream. At this point, the Butler (Cup-bearer)) remembered his friend Joseph from prison days who had interpreted his dream and that of the Baker. Joseph’s interpretation of their dreams had come true. This was the man to send to the king to interpret his dream.

Pharaoh’s dream, itself full of Egyptian coloring, predicted according to Joseph’s interpretation that Egypt would experience seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. The years of plenty would of course cause no problem; but in a country dependent on agriculture, seven years of famine could spell disaster. The Pharaoh is then offered sage advice by Joseph: find a man to supervise Egypt’s produce during the seven good years. He should put aside one fifth of the produce of the seven good years for distribution during the seven bad years. In Gen. 41:39, two remarkable things take place. First, Pharaoh acknowledges that God (singular) has revealed all this to Joseph. He must have been told this fact by Joseph himself. It is interesting that this man of God was not afraid to give credit to the Lord even while speaking

to a pagan king who was considered to be a god on earth by his people. This shows solid faith and remarkable courage on the part of Joseph. Second, Pharaoh realizes that Joseph has the Lord's wisdom and appoints him to be the one in charge of Egypt's agricultural production during these important years.

After all of this takes place, a very significant scene is described. In Gen. 41:40-45, Joseph is appointed to high office in Egypt and is given several rewards (a ring, a gold chain, new linen robes, a chariot, an Egyptian name, and a wife). This scene has created a good deal of controversy among scholars. Traditionally, the entire scene has been taken to represent some kind of investiture ceremony. Joseph is named to high position, and is given the trappings of high office. This interpretation is, however, certainly wrong. The Egyptologist Donald B. Redford in his study of the Joseph Story examined all known scenes in Egyptian tomb paintings where individuals are given gold chains.²¹ In the thirty-two known paintings of this event, not one has anything to do with induction into high office. They all, on the other hand, show an individual being rewarded for service rendered. Redford uses this information to deny the accuracy of the Biblical account. We do not agree with him on that point, though. What is happening in these verses is a two-fold ceremony. In vs. 40-41, Pharaoh officially appoints Joseph to high office in Egypt **(in our next article, we will try to establish exactly which**

²¹ D. B. Redford, A Study of the Biblical Story of Joseph (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970), pp. 208 ff.

Egyptian titles Joseph held). However, in vs. 42-45, Pharaoh rewards Joseph for what he has revealed.

Let us look at how Joseph was rewarded. Of the three items of personal adornment mentioned, the gold chain is by far the most important. As Redford has pointed out, this is a common item in reward scenes in Egyptian tomb paintings (most of the examples come from the New Kingdom period, somewhat later than the days of Joseph). While the ring and the linen robes are not prominently mentioned in Egyptian reward scenes, the gold chain catches the attention because one would not expect an Egyptian reward ceremony to occur without it. This again indicates the accurate Egyptian nature of the details of the Joseph Story.

Joseph's new chariot is also of special interest.²² As a vehicle for war, the chariot seems to have only been introduced into Egypt during the Hyksos period , 1786-1570 B.C. This would be, according to the dates calculated from the Bible itself, too late for Joseph. There is, however, nothing strange about the Egyptians having a few chariots for high officials to use in the Middle Kingdom period when Joseph lived. In this passage of Scripture we are not looking at war chariots lined up for battle in some anachronistic way. In fact, the implication of the Biblical text is that there were not many chariots in Egypt at this time. Joseph's chariot is called "the

²² On this see C. F. Aling, Egypt and Bible History (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), pp.44-45.

second chariot,” implying that the only person who outranked him, Pharaoh himself, had the other.

What of Joseph’s new name? Unfortunately, scholars are uncertain about the Egyptian original for the Hebrew version Zaphnath-paaneah.²³ Identification of the Egyptian name of Joseph would be of great interest, since some of the Viziers of the Middle Kingdom period are known to us. Our small sample of names, though, probably does not include Joseph’s.

Joseph also was granted a wife. The woman’s name was Asenath, which is a good Egyptian female name. We know little of her, other than her name and the name of her father. Knowing Joseph, however, we must assume that he taught her to have faith in the true God of Heaven, despite her pagan background. But who was her father? The Bible gives us several tantalizing facts about the man. He is called Potiphera. This is a variant of the name Potiphar, the only other male named in the Joseph Story. As you recall Potiphar was Joseph’s former master. In both cases it is likely that we are not dealing with a personal name at all. Such a grammatical construction of a name, meaning “the one given by Re (the Sun god),” would only be possible in the later periods of Egyptian history. It would also be strange to have two men named who have virtually the same name, while none of the kings is named. It seems most likely that the two men involved are not actually being referred to by name, but that we are being

²³ See Kenneth A. Kitchen, Zaphnath-Paaneah,” in the New Bible Dictionary, ed. J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), p 1335, and the extended discussion by Redford, pp. 230-231.

told that they were native Egyptians. We are also told that the father of Asenath was a priest.

This in itself is not terribly significant, other than to show that Joseph was being highly favored since priests were at the pinnacle of Egyptian society. What is important is the further information we are given in Gen. 41:45. Asenath's father was Priest of the city of On. On was known to the Greeks as Heliopolis, and was the center of worship of the sun god Re. It was also the educational center of ancient Egypt. The High Priest of the god Re at that city became a key figure in Egyptian religion and politics.

That Joseph married the daughter of a priest of Re at Heliopolis is important as confirmation of our date for Joseph in the Middle Kingdom and not in the Hyksos period as so many scholars wish to do. His marriage must be regarded as a high honor, as it is part of the rewards given him for what he has done. It thus stands to reason that the priest of On and his god Re were highly favored by the Pharaoh at that time. Under the Hyksos, the god Re, while not being persecuted as was once thought by some scholars, was certainly not the main god. For the Hyksos the god Set, a Nile delta deity often equated with the Canaanite god Baal, was number one. If Joseph dates to the Hyksos period, we would not expect to find Re being so important. That Joseph marries a daughter of the Priest of Re is evidence for his belonging to a period of history when native Egyptian kings ruled in Egypt, rather than Hyksos foreigners.

In our next article, we will examine the titles Joseph held in the Egyptian government.

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Part V: The Egyptian Titles of Joseph

The specific Egyptian titles granted to Joseph by Pharaoh have been discussed at great length by modern scholars. The key verse is Gen. 45:8, which mentions three titles held by Joseph. The Hebrew text of course does not give the Egyptian form of these three titles. Years of scholarly debate have arisen over the exact Egyptian renditions of the Hebrew words or phrases. Of the three titles which Joseph held, let us begin with the one obvious title, and then move on to the two more complex and problematical titles.

Genesis 45:8 states that Joseph was made Lord of all Pharaoh's House. This title has an exact Egyptian counterpart, which is normally translated into English as "Chief Steward of the King." The main job of the Chief Steward was supervision of estates, the number of which would have been vast. This fits well with Joseph's advice regarding the coming years of plenty and the following years of famine. As Chief Steward, Joseph would be well placed to prepare for the coming famine during the years of more abundant production. It is interesting to observe that another specific responsibility of the Chief Steward was to take charge of the royal granaries, where the agricultural wealth of the nation was stored. As the person in charge of

these great storehouses, Joseph was ideally placed for carrying out his suggestion to store food during the good years for the bad.

On the practical side, two things can be learned from Joseph's post as Chief Steward. First, note how God had prepared him for his task. No one starts out in life at the top of the ladder. We all must learn the ropes, so to speak, from the ground floor up. Joseph had been steward of the estates of Potiphar. This job was very much like that of Chief Steward of the King, but on a much smaller scale. But Joseph without doubt received on-the-job training as Potiphar's steward which stood him in good stead when he later was promoted to the same job in the King's household. As Potiphar's steward, Joseph did his job faithfully. We are told that all that Potiphar owned prospered under the stewardship of Joseph. Joseph evidently learned well. He was therefore ready when the Lord allowed him to become Chief Steward for all of Egypt. A second point is also worth mentioning. As Chief Steward of the King, Joseph was perfectly placed to care for God's Chosen People during the famine. As Gen. 45:7 tells us, God put Joseph into this position in order to save the Patriarchal family. It is almost certain that Joseph did not know this at the time of his appointment, but God had plans for him. And, in the same way, wherever God places us, He may have a major task for us to do later. Like Joseph, we should do the best we can at whatever task He gives us, so that we will be ready when called upon later.

Gen. 45:8 also calls Joseph “Father to Pharaoh.” Of course, this does not mean that Joseph was the physical father of the King of Egypt. There was no blood connection between the two men. Pharaoh was an Egyptian; Joseph was a Hebrew. Even if we assume, as many scholars do, that the Pharaoh in the Joseph story was a Hyksos king, there is no reason to suspect any blood relation between the two men. Dismissing that possibility, what then does the phrase “Father of Pharaoh” mean? Father of Pharaoh, or more literally “Father of the God” (the Egyptians believed their kings to be divine), had a variety of meanings in ancient Egypt. One was as a term for the tutor of the King during the ruler’s childhood. In Joseph’s case this is not likely. He had never met the King until called out of prison to interpret the royal dream. Nor does the Bible ever suggest that Joseph held such a post. Another way the title was used was as a designation for an individual whose daughter became a wife of the reigning king. In other words, “Father of the God” meant “father-in-law.” Again, we may dismiss this meaning for Joseph’s title. The Bible says nothing about Joseph having any daughters, let alone daughters who married the King of Egypt. Yet another usage of the title was a designation for minor priests in Egypt’s complex state religion. Again, this does not seem even a remote possibility for Joseph. He was never a priest in ancient Egypt, and as a servant of the true God, he would not ever want to hold such an office. A last use of the title “Father of the God,” however, makes more sense for Joseph. The Egyptians used this title as a special honor given to officials who had served long and well, or who had done the King some special favor. Joseph would easily

qualify for the title Father of the God when used in this way; in fact, this is the only usage that makes sense. Joseph would have been named Father of the God for interpreting the dream of the King, and for suggesting a plan for Egypt to get through seven terrible years of famine.

But Joseph's third possible title is even more controversial, and merits a more extended treatment. The basic question is whether Joseph ever became Vizier, or Prime Minister, of Egypt. Gen 45:8, by calling "Ruler throughout all the Land of Egypt," seems to suggest that he became the Vizier of Egypt. And, when Pharaoh promoted and rewarded Joseph, he said that only as King would he be greater than Joseph. But the modern scholar William Ward has argued that Joseph never became Vizier.²⁴ Ward states that Hebrew phrases such as those mentioned above are not specific equivalents of the Egyptian title of Vizier, but are rather only a rendition of vague Egyptian epithets given to other, lesser, officials.

However, Joseph obviously held only one of the vague epithets discuss by Ward and that epithet was "Chief of the Entire Land." While Ward is correct in stating that it was most commonly used for officials of lower rank, it was most commonly used for Viziers. And, for the phrase in Gen. 41:40, "Only in the throne will I be greater than thou," no exact Egyptian parallel exists. The Hebrew text strongly suggests that Joseph became Vizier of Egypt.

²⁴ William Ward, "The Egyptian Office of Joseph," Journal of Semitic Studies 5(1960), pp. 144-150.

Assuming that Joseph was indeed Vizier, what were his duties? There are Egyptian inscriptions which describe the duties of the Vizier of Egypt. Although such inscriptions are much later than Joseph's time (they date from the New Kingdom), several texts exist which describe in great detail the duties and powers of the office of Vizier. The Vizier was the chief keeper of the government records, was the supervisor of the government in general, appointed lower officials of government to office, controlled access to the person of the Pharaoh, and generally supervised construction work and industry in Egypt's state-run economy.²⁵ More pertinent to Joseph, the Vizier also was in charge of agricultural production, just what he needed to care for God's people in the time of famine. Also, another power held by the Vizier has great interest in regard to the coming of Israel into Egypt: he received foreign delegations. So, when Joseph's brothers came to Egypt for food, they would normally meet with the Vizier and Joseph is the man they met (Gen. 42). It is also interesting that in referring to Joseph, the brothers call him "the man." This is perhaps a play on words, since the Egyptian word for man and the Egyptian word for Vizier are only one letter different.

The positions of Vizier and Chief Steward of the King were both very high posts in the government of Ancient Egypt, even as far back as the Middle Kingdom. It is reasonable to ask if there are any known officials with these titles that could have been Joseph. The answer is no, at

²⁵ Charles Aling, Egypt and Bible History (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), pp. 49.

least at the present time. One problem is that we know comparatively few Viziers and Chief Stewards from the Middle Kingdom. Also, another major obstacle is that we do not know the Egyptian form of Joseph's name, only the Hebrew. There is, however, one fact of interest that we know about Middle Kingdom Viziers. It is unheard of in the Middle Kingdom period to find one person holding both the title of Vizier and the title of Chief Steward of the King. But, from the time of Sesostri III of the Middle Kingdom, we do find an example. It is possible that Joseph broke new ground in this regard, being the first person to hold both positions at the same time.

As for the seven years of famine, no contemporary Egyptian record of this famine exists. But from a later time, when Greek kings ruled Egypt after Alexander the Great's conquest of Egypt, there is an Egyptian text which mentions a seven year famine, but dates it to the reign of King Djoser of the Old Kingdom. One wonders if this is a garbled memory of the famine in Joseph's day, simply redated to the reign of a more famous king. Confirmation of such a theory is nearly impossible, but it is interesting to speculate about. **In our next article in this series we will consider some final aspects of the Joseph story.**

Joseph in Egypt

Part VI: Joseph, The Last Years

We do not know how many years Joseph served as Egypt's Vizier (Prime Minister). It is very interesting that he evidently held two key titles, Vizier and Chief Steward of the King. This is very unusual in Egyptian history.

Significantly, the best known example comes from the Middle Kingdom, exactly the period of Joseph's career. While the official holding these two posts cannot be identified with Joseph, it is probable that Joseph was the first to do so and set a precedent.

Two deaths are recorded near the end of the Book of Genesis, that of Jacob and that of Joseph himself. Both men were embalmed, or mummified. Today, the popular view is that this was a mysterious process about which we know little or nothing. Such is not the case. With the large number of mummies preserved in museums, we would be poor scientists indeed if we could not reconstruct this procedure. What were the basics of mummification?²⁶

Two things were essential for the mummification process. First, the body must be dried. A great deal was accomplished in this regard by the naturally dry climate of Egypt. I remember seeing a photograph of a Roman soldier who had died in Egypt and who had been buried in the sand without any kind of embalming treatment at all. His hair is well preserved, as are his teeth, and there is a good deal of skin remaining too. The Egyptians aided this natural drying process, however. They packed the body with a powdery substance called natron (basically sodium

²⁶ See Barbara Adams, Egyptian Mummies (Shire Publications: 1984), and on the popular level, John J. Davis, Mummies, Men, and Madness (Winona Lake: BMH Books, 1942).

carbonate and sodium bicarbonate). This chemical is found naturally in several locations in Egypt.²⁷

It is important to remember that a liquid solution was not used, but that the body was packed in this dry powder for a period of many days. The exact length of time in the natron varied according to which period of Egyptian history the mummy belonged and according to the amount being spent on the process. Presumably, a rich family would spend more on preserving their family members.

A second thing necessary for mummification was the removal of the vital organs of the body. If these are left inside the person, they will speed decay. Thus, the Egyptian embalmers removed all of the abdominal organs except the heart, and also removed the brain.

This last procedure created a problem, however. The Egyptians were concerned about the body retaining its identity. They did not want to harm the head or face in any way. They resolved this problem by unraveling and removing the brain through the nose with a sharp hook of some kind. Gruesome as this may sound, it worked rather well. After their removal, some of the organs were wrapped and placed inside containers in the tomb with the mummy. It was realized that they were needed for a happy life in the next world!

²⁷ See A. Lucas, Ancient Egyptian Materials and Industries (London: Edward Arnold, 1962), pp. 263 ff.

There were of course certain religious ceremonies that went along with the mummification process. Joseph, I am sure, would not have wanted any of these done for him, and, if he had any say in the matter, they were not done. But, after all this was accomplished, the body would be skillfully wrapped in spiced linen and placed in a coffin.

Next, the mummy would be entombed. In Joseph's case, instructions had been left to remove him from Egypt when his family went out of that land. It is, therefore, useless to look for the mummy of Joseph in Egypt, since it left Egypt at the time of the Exodus. There is one final observation on Joseph's life and career: according to Gen. 50:26, Joseph was 110 years old at the time of his death. This age is interesting, since in ancient Egypt 110 was considered the perfect age at which to die.²⁸

What happened to the Jewish people after Joseph's death? At first nothing happened. But in the early verses of Exodus ch. 1, however, we see that a king rose up who knew nothing of Joseph. This personage was, I believe, a Hyksos Pharaoh.

The Hyksos were a foreign people from Syria-Palestine who ruled the northern portions of Egypt in the so-called Second Intermediate Period, ca. 1786-1570 B.C. That this king was a Hyksos is shown by a number of things. The Hebrew of Ex. 1:8 indicates a negative kind of rulership. Also, Ex. 1:9 states that the king had a fear that the Hebrews would outnumber his

²⁸ C. F. Aling, Egypt and Bible History (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1981), p. 51, note 25 for reference.

people. It is not realistic to believe that the Jews would ever become more numerous than the native population of Egypt; but they certainly could outnumber a ruling minority like the Hyksos.

Finally, in Ex. 1:11 we are told that the Hebrews, as slaves, labored at two cities: Pithom and Ramses. Pithom is not located yet with certainty, and is in any case not important for our discussion here. But Ramses was the great delta capital under the Hyksos first and then later under King Ramses II of the thirteenth century B.C. In Dynasty 18, ca. 1570-1325 B.C., little or no major work went on there. It seems certain, then that the Hebrews worked at Ramses during the Hyksos period.

The bondage of God's people lasted for many years. Joseph's accomplishments were forgotten for the time being, but were remembered and recorded in Jewish records, were to be written of by Moses, and were also to be rehearsed by uncounted generations to come. As Joseph was not forgotten by the Jewish people, he is not forgotten by us. It is hoped that these brief articles have helped to make him a real person, set against the background of Egyptian history and civilization.

