

EGYPTIAN SOJOURN I: JOSEPH'S DESCENT

The story of Joseph and his brothers has intrigued modern readers for generations, speaking as it does to the universal passions of sibling rivalry, jealousy, despair, triumph over adversity, and forgiveness. Scholars, too, have been fascinated by the story. Tantalized by the colorful details of Egyptian life and customs, they have sought to discover the degree to which such information is historically accurate or literarily elaborated.

Joseph's descends into Egypt as the property of a camel caravan, sold into slavery to the Ishmaelites by his jealous brothers or else stolen from the pit they had thrown him into by a passing band of Midianite traders (the Hebrew text of Genesis 37:27-28 is ambiguous, and admits of both these and other interpretations). Slaves were usually the victims of war, kidnapping, or poverty.¹ The price of 20 pieces of silver was apparently the going rate for slaves in that region of the ancient Near East at the time the story takes place.² Regardless of how Joseph gets to Egypt, divine will is served, for Joseph is positioned by his descent to rise to a rank from which he may save his people and restructure Egyptian society.

Joseph is sold to Potiphar, who is apparently employed as commander of the bodyguard in Pharaoh's palace.³ The false accusation of Joseph by Potiphar's wife reflects a motif from a famous Egyptian story, Tale of Two Brothers, in which a long tale begins when the elder brother's wife unsuccessfully tries to seduce the younger brother, and then falsely denounces him to her husband. There are few other points of contact between the Egyptian story and the biblical account of Joseph. In the Egyptian tale, the main characters are all divine, as is appropriate in the philosophy underlying Egyptian kingship. The complex story involves many fairy tale elements, including magic, talking animals, and the transformation from human to beast and back again, and focuses on the issue of rebirth, a subject of enormous importance in the Egyptian religious view. None of these elements is present in the Joseph story.⁴

Potiphar's household was probably near the administrative center of the capital. The prison into which Joseph is remanded following his accusation by Potiphar's wife appears to be a detention facility not far from the court, where people accused but not yet convicted were held. This would explain how the royal butler and baker came to be incarcerated along with Joseph, before their cases had been decided.⁵

-
1. All of these have biblical precedents; for war slaves, see treatment of the Gibeonites in Joshua 9; for slavery due to poverty, see, for example, the laws of release in Deuteronomy 15:12-18; Deuteronomy prohibits kidnapping for slavery (24:7), implying it must have been practiced at least to some extent, as we see in the story of Joseph. Ancient law codes take slavery for granted. See also some of the sources cited in ISBE, 1127b for slavery in Egypt.
 2. ISBE 1127a, citing Hammurapi's code section #s 116, 214, 252 in ANET p.170, 175f, etc.
 3. ISBE 1128a, who cites biblical verses and compares Genesis 39 verses 1 and 20ff. with Genesis 40:1ff.
 4. Susan Tower Hollis, The Ancient Egyptian "Tale of Two Brothers": The Oldest Fairy Tale in the World, Norman, Oklahoma, University of Oklahoma Press, 1990. See especially pp.163-165.
 5. ISBE 1128a.

The plot of the Joseph story hinges on his ability to interpret the dreams of the Butler, the Baker, and Pharaoh himself. Scholars have known that dream interpretation has roots that go back very far in both Egypt and Mesopotamia, so that receiving a divine message in a dream that requires interpretation is not a particularly Egyptian element in the Joseph story, but was widespread all over the ancient Near East.⁶

Joseph is rewarded for his wise interpretation of the Pharaoh's troubling dreams. He is appointed to administer the plan he suggests to prepare for the predicted seven years of famine. Joseph's investiture by Pharaoh in Genesis 41:42-43 reflects Egyptian practices shown in monuments and art. Joseph receives a signet ring, a linen garment and a gold chain, and is paraded around in Pharaoh's second-best chariot with a crier shouting before him, all items attested in the mid-second-millennium b.c.e.⁷

The most authentically Egyptian elements in the Joseph story are the personal names.⁸ The name of Joseph's master, Potiphar (Genesis 39:1) and the name of his father-in-law (Genesis 41:45), Potiphera, both mean "he whom the divinity gives." This name is first attested beginning at the end of the New Kingdom, about 1200 b.c.e.⁹ Zaphenath-Paneh, the name given to Joseph when he is invested by Pharaoh in Genesis 41:45, is a well-attested name- formula that means "the divinity spoke and he lives." It originates in the twenty-first dynasty (about 1085 b.c.e.) Joseph's wife, Asenath, (Genesis 41:45) has a name originating in the New Kingdom sometime between 1558-1085 b.c.e. It means "belonging to the deity."

Royal titles and epithets also have an Egyptian flavor, but because of the international nature of diplomacy in the ancient Near East, the equivalent titles appear in biblical Hebrew as well as other Semitic languages, and cannot thus be placed only in Egypt. These include the term for "overseer" in Genesis 41:34, "Peqidim," a title of Aramaic origin, and the title "Saris," or "officer" in Genesis 37:36, from the Akkadian Sha-Reshi ("he who is at the head,") a common designation in Assyrian administration.¹⁰

6. ISBE 1128b.

7. ISBE, 1128b.

8. Discussion of personal names follows Redford, Egypt, Canaan, see pp. 424-425.

9. In dating, I have always tried to give b.c.e. dates alongside other kinds of chronologies (dynasties, kingdoms, eras, etc.); However, I have had to correlate several sources to do this. This date for the approximate ending of the New Kingdom comes from Hallo, William W. and Simpson, William Kelly, The Ancient Near East: A History, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971, pp.282-3.

For your convenience, here is a brief CHRONOLOGICAL ORIENTATION: Second Intermediate, or Hyksos, period, follows the end of the Middle Kingdom and starts at the end of Dynasty 13 and goes through Dynasty 17, from approximately 1715-1558 b.c.e. In this period, Egypt was very fragmented (so there is dynasty overlap depending on the region you are looking at) and kings succeeded one another rapidly (76 kings in 184 years). [For fact-checking, See Hallo and Kelly, pp.250-251]. New Kingdom encompasses Dynasties 18-20, dating approximately 1558-1085 bce. The Ramesside Pharaohs (and some say the Exodus) are from this period.

10. Redford, Egypt, Canaan, p.424-5.

EGYPTIAN SOJOURN II: JOSEPH'S RISE

Many scholars have suggested that Joseph's rise to power in Egypt fits best into the period of the Hyksos rulers of Egypt. From the 18th to 16th centuries b.c.e. it is believed that a group of Northwest Semitic people infiltrated Egypt from the Levant,¹¹ taking advantage of a time of disarray in the ordinarily stable succession of Egyptian Pharaohs to take control of Lower Egypt from their base at Avaris, in the eastern Nile Delta. This group, called the Hyksos from an Egyptian word meaning "rulers of foreign lands," made up the fifteenth and sixteenth dynasties of Egyptian Pharaohs, from about 1700-1542 b.c.e., during an era of Egyptian history termed by scholars the Second Intermediate Period. They were ousted from Egypt by the founders of the eighteenth dynasty at the beginning of the Egyptian New Kingdom period, events that resonate with the account in Exodus 1:8 of the rise of a Pharaoh who "knew not Joseph."¹²

Advocates argue that an Asiatic such as Joseph would be most likely to find a welcome from fellow-Asiatics. These scholars place the biblical Land of Goshen [mentioned in Genesis 45:10, 46:28-29, and 47:1] in the eastern Delta region where Avaris was located.¹³

Other details imply a Canaanite geographical orientation rather than an Egyptian view. For example, it is an EAST wind parching the stalks in Pharaoh's dream in Genesis 41:23 and 27, as it does in Israel, though the dry, hot, scorching wind in Egypt is the SOUTH wind.¹⁴

One element in the Joseph story that does have a strong Egyptian flavor, however, is the theme of the wise man who is falsely accused, and who rises to power and acclaim through the interpretation of an inscrutable dream or riddle. This theme occurs in at least four separate works dating from the Late Period of Egypt,¹⁵ from the first Persian domination through the conquest by Alexander the Great in 525-332 b.c.e.¹⁶

This theme also appears in the late biblical book of Daniel, set at about the same period. First, in Chapter 2, Daniel recounts and interprets the king's dream, thus saving all the king's counsellors from certain death. Again, in Chapter 5, Daniel successfully unravels the riddle of the handwriting on the wall for King Belshazzar who rewards Daniel for his wisdom although the message is the King's own doom. In the Bible, of course, the interpreter's wisdom is attributed to God and not to personal achievement as it is in the Egyptian literature.

This theological message is much more straightforward than is any historical background for the Joseph story. The Egyptian elements in the tale are taken from a

-
11. Redford, Donald B. Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times, Princeton University Press, 1992; detailed discussion of Northwest Semitic origin for Hyksos throughout this chapter; for fact-check purposes, see pp.106-107.
 12. Shanks, Hershel (editor), Ancient Israel: A Short History from Abraham to the Roman Destruction of the Temple, Prentice Hall, 1988, 37-38.
 13. Shanks, 26
 14. Shanks, p.26-27
 15. See Redford, Egypt, Canaan, pp. 428-9 for discussion on Egyptian wisdom motif and Joseph story.
 16. Hallo & Simpson, p.301.

variety of periods, many of them much later than the time in which the events are supposed to take place. For example, Pharaoh (Egyptian for “great house”) is not used as a designation for the king until the fifteenth century b.c.e., a century or two after the Hyksos are expelled from Egypt. The Land of Rameses, a designation for the region of Goshen where Joseph’s family ultimately settles, refers to a Pharaoh of the nineteenth dynasty who reigned from 1279-1213 b.c.e.¹⁷

The Bible credits Joseph in Genesis 47:13-26 as the author of sweeping Egyptian land reform, putting all land into the hands of the Pharaoh except that owned by the priests. This situation apparently obtained in Egypt at many different periods, both earlier and later than the setting of our Joseph story.¹⁸ Land practices in the Nile Valley varied in accordance to the complex power politics of each era, and probably is not attributable to the plans or actions of a single individual.¹⁹ Details in the text, such as the importance of the Pharaoh’s birthday, and the Egyptian word-play implicit in the symbol of “cow” for “year” are of indeterminate date, and can be either early or late.²⁰

The mortuary practices and mourning customs of Egypt are apparently applied to both Jacob (Genesis 50:2f.), and later, to Joseph (50:26), who lives to the Egyptian ideal age of 110. Compare the biblical ideal of 120 years, attained, for example, by Moses. Seventy days of Egyptian mourning are observed following embalming, and remains are put into coffins instead of bones being gathered in burial caves as in Israel. Nevertheless, both Jacob and Joseph emphasize their cultural identities by insisting on being buried in their land of origin, in the tombs of their ancestors.²¹

While the cultural and literary roots of the Joseph story are ambiguous, and appear to partake sometimes of early periods²² and sometimes of later times,²³ sometimes of Egypt and sometimes of Mesopotamia or the Levant, the theological message of the Joseph story is unmistakable, acknowledged explicitly by Joseph twice in Genesis 45:5 and 50:20. Throughout the account, the subtle but inevitable workings of the divine hand in human events is everpresent and reassuring.

Diane M. Sharon

17. Shanks, p.26-27

18. ISBE 1129b and Redford, Egypt, Canaan, 425-6.

19. Redford, Egypt, Canaan, pp.425-6.

20. Redford, Egypt, Canaan, p.426-7.

21. ISBE 1129b.

22. See especially Kitchen in ISBE article, *passim*.

23. Redford throughout, see especially Egypt, Canaan pp.422-29.