

Joseph in Egypt

Fourth of Six Parts

By Charles Aling

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 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 18th Dynasty in about 1400 BC, some 300 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 BC. 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. This 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 12. As all of us will recall from our own study of the

Scriptures, Pharaoh had had a dream. His magicians (the Hebrew in Genesis 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 (Cupbearer) 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 Genesis 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 Genesis 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. The interpretation of 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.

[graphic] Pharaoh gave Joseph "Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, to be his wife" (Gn 41:45). Little remains at On (called Heliopolis by the Greeks) except for this lone obelisk. A grand temple to the Egyptian god Re stood here in Joseph's day.

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 (Redford 1970: 208 If). In the 32 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 verses 40-41, Pharaoh officially appoints Joseph to high office in Egypt (in our next article, we will try to establish exactly which Egyptian titles Joseph held). However, in verses 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 our 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 (Aling 1981: 44-45). As a vehicle for war, the chariot seems to have only been introduced into Egypt during the Hyksos period, 1786-1570 BC. 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 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 (Kitchen 1996; Redford, 1970: 230-31). 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 of the period. 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 we all 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

[graphic] Pharaoh had Joseph "ride in a chariot as his second-in-command, and men shouted before him, "Make way!" (Gn 41:43). Golden state chariot from the tomb of Tutankhamun, ca. 1325 BC.

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 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 Genesis 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 was 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, not Hyksos foreigners. In our next article, we will examine the titles Joseph held in the Egyptian government.

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[graphic]Artist's reconstruction of the entry facade of the Temple of Re at On. Joseph's father-in-law was a priest at this temple and Joseph's marriage to his daughter no doubt had political ramifications.

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