

Lesson 4: Life in Egypt

INTRODUCTION TO EGYPT

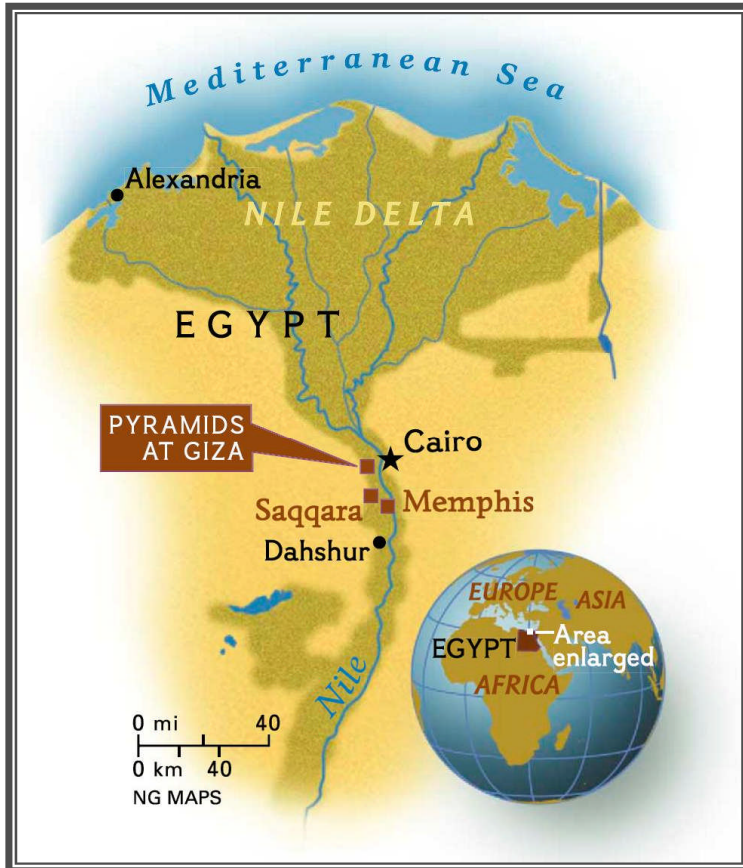


Fig 1. The Nile River Delta

The distance from Cairo to the 1st Cataract is 583 miles (see map on last page).

- Today, at the 1st cataract, the High Aswan Dam has been built to prevent the Nile from flooding.

Ancient Egypt

Upper and Lower Egypt were independently ruled for many years. It was not until c. 3000 BC that Upper and Lower Egypt were united together.

- As a symbol of this united Egypt the Pharaohs wore a headpiece, which indicated both the insignia from Upper Egypt (a vulture) and the insignia from Lower Egypt (a viper), see fig. 2.
- The history of united Egypt runs from c. 3000 BC down to the time of Alexander the Great, c. 330 BC, a period of almost 2700 years over 31 different dynasties.

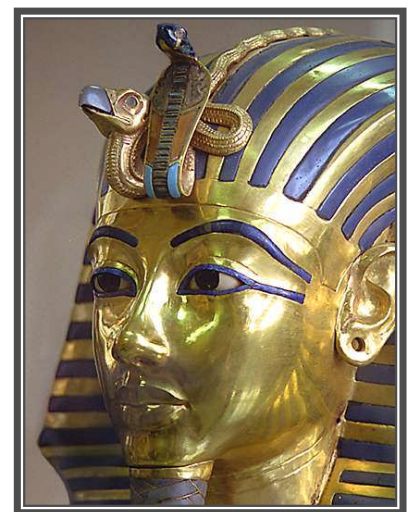


Fig 2. United Egypt

Looking at a map of Egypt (fig. 1) you see a river that starts near the equator and runs south to north, it is called the Nile River. The Nile River runs north into the Nile Delta and finally into the Mediterranean Sea.

- Practically everyone in Egypt lives along the Nile River.
- The Nile River is approximately 3,470 miles long.
- The width of the Nile Valley varies between 12 to 31 miles.

The Northern part of Egypt around the Delta is called Lower Egypt and the southern part of Egypt is called Upper Egypt. This is because the Nile River runs south to north.

Egypt's climate is very dry, there is practically no rainfall.

- There is some rainfall along the coast, but 100 miles south of the Mediterranean Sea, by Cairo, there is no rainfall year round.
- The Nile River sustains the population of Egypt up and down its entire length.

Egyptian Settlements

In Lower Egypt there are ancient settlements around the area of Cairo, just before the Nile River flows into the Delta region.

- Today, Cairo is a great city with a population of over 15 million people.
- Near Cairo are the ancient cities of Memphis, Giza and Saqqara, which formed the main population center of ancient Lower Egypt. Various Pharaohs ruled in this area.
- This is also where three of the main pyramids are located (fig. 3).
- The center pyramid looks like it has something on the top. This substance is called Alabaster, a translucent stone, which was used to cover the entire pyramid.



Fig 3. Pyramids at Giza

- There are about 97 different pyramids throughout all of Egypt, mostly smaller ones.
- The pyramids are very large. The pyramid on the right is called the Great Pyramid and is 500 feet high, 720 feet along the base, and 720 feet along an edge.
- The Pyramids at Giza were built around 2700 to 2500 BC.

In Upper Egypt is an area called Thebes, in the Book of Nahum it is called No-amon ([Nahum 3:8](#)).

- Near Thebes is the Valley of the Kings where Pharaoh Tutankhamen (King Tut's) tomb was discovered in 1922.
- While pyramids were primarily used for burial in Lower Egypt, in Upper Egypt, near Thebes, they dug into the sides of the canyons for burial.

Important Egyptian Archaeological Finds

1. The Amarna Letters

- Between Cairo and Thebes, about 200 miles north of Thebes, is a place called Amarna.
- In 1887 about 350 clay tablets were found at Amarna, the site of Amenhotep IV (Akhenaten's) capital Akhetaten. They are written in cuneiform characters, mostly Akkadian.
- Most of the letters are dated to the reigns of Amenhotep III (1402-1364) and Amenhotep IV (1350-1334).
- The letters reflect the lively correspondence between Egypt and kings in Canaan, Babylonia, Mitanni and Assyria.

- Around 50 of the letters dealt with the political times in Palestine from Jerusalem, Gezer, Askalon, Megiddo and Shechem, many of which stated that the Hapiru were invading them.
 - The Hapiru are references to nomads, mercenary warriors, or various people invading lands. This may be a reference to the Israelites during the conquest of Joshua.

2. The Elephantine letters

- Near the 1st cataract of Egypt is an island called Elephantine. On the island was found evidence of a clan of Jewish people that lived there. Papyri have been found dating from 650 – 399 BC.
- Of the documents that were found many dealt with legal issues, social life, laws and customs.
- This unique Jewish community possessed its own temple to Yahweh.
- The papyri are written in Aramaic.
- Official excavation of the island began in 1904.

3. The Rosetta Stone

- An important discovery that significantly helped advance Egyptian archaeology was the discovery of the Rosetta Stone (fig. 7) in 1799, named as such for being found at Rosetta.
- Napoleon's army was attacking Egypt and as they were rebuilding a fort they came across a black basalt stone about four feet tall. The stone had three different languages on it, at the top was hieroglyphic, in the middle was demotic and at the bottom was a Greek script. Each one of these parts told the same story using a different language. The Rosetta Stone was carved in 196 BC during the reign of Ptolemy V (205 - 180).
- Jean-François Champollion, a Frenchman, deciphered the hieroglyphs by 1822. He was able to crack the code from the Greek to the demotic and then finally to the hieroglyphic.

4. Merneptah Stela

- The most important mention of Israel outside the Bible is that in the Merneptah Stela (fig. 4). Discovered in 1896 in Merneptah's mortuary temple in Thebes by Flinders Petrie, the stela is a eulogy to pharaoh Merneptah, who ruled Egypt after Rameses the Great, c. 1236-1223 BC.
- Of significance to Biblical studies is a short section at the end of the poem describing a campaign to Canaan by Merneptah in the first few years of his reign. One line mentions Israel: *"Israel is laid waste, its seed is not."* Here we have the earliest mention of Israel outside the Bible and the only mention of Israel in Egyptian records.
- This puts Israel as a nation right after the conquest of Canaan by Joshua (1406 BC).



Fig 4. The Merneptah Stele

JOSEPH

The biblical account in Egypt begins with Joseph. He was a person of remarkable gifts and had the faith of Abraham, the goodness of Isaac, and the courage of Jacob. Above all, he was a man of obedience to God and one of the most admirable persons in the Old Testament.

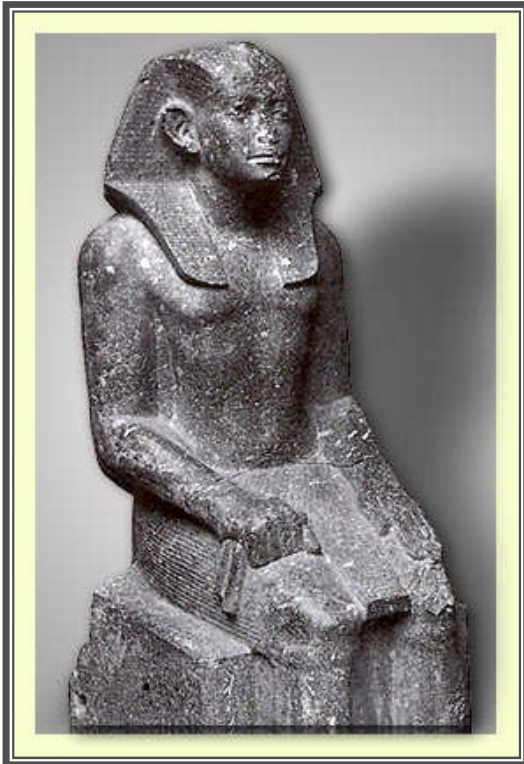


Fig 5. Senusret II

If the Biblical numbers are taken literally the kings during the enslavement and rise to power of Joseph would be Senusret II, fig. 5, (1894-1878 BC) and Senusret III (1878-1841 BC), of the 12th Dynasty.

- This can be determined from [1 Kings 6:1](#), a verse that dates the Exodus 480 years before the fourth year of Solomon, c. 966 BC.
- [1 Kings 6:1](#) is seen as dating the Exodus to c. 1446 BC, and [Exodus 12:40](#) is seen as placing the entrance of Jacob and his family into an Egypt where Joseph holds high office under the reign of Senusret III.
- Joseph's career as an Egyptian governmental official would thus begin under Senusret II and would continue into the reign of Senusret III.

Joseph lived 71 years after his family came to Egypt. This means that he died c. 1805 BC, during the reign of Amenemhet III (1841-1797), approximately 25 years prior to the end of the 12th Dynasty.

Specific examples from Joseph's life provide support for a 12th dynasty date.

Sold Into Egypt ([Genesis 37](#))

As we are told in [Genesis chapter 37](#) Joseph was sold by his brothers to a caravan of Midianites for the price of 20 shekels of silver. Interestingly enough, 20 shekels of silver was the average price of a slave at that time.

- In prior centuries the price had been less, averaging 10 to 15 shekels, and by the 15th century, 30 to 40 shekels. This is further confirmation of this event occurring in the early centuries of the 2nd millennium.

[GE 37:28](#) Then some Midianite traders passed by, so they pulled *him* up and lifted Joseph out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty *shekels* of silver. Thus they brought Joseph into Egypt.
[Genesis 37:28 \(NASB\)](#)

What is a shekel?

1 Shekel = 11.5 grams	20 Shekel = 230 grams	1 deben = 90 grams	1 kit = 9 grams
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The following Egyptian texts, listing the prices of slaves, have been discovered:

- Iry-nofret paid the equivalent of 4 deben and 1 kit of silver (370 grams) for a Syrian slave girl:
“...[As for me, I am the wife of the District Overseer Sa-Mut], and I came to live in his house, and I worked and [wove?] and took care of my (own) clothes. In the year 15, 7 years after I had entered the house of the District Overseer Sa-[Mut], the merchant Ray approached me

with the Syrian slave Gemni-herimentet, while she was (still) a girl, [and he] said to me: “Buy this girl and give me the price for her”--so he spoke to me. And I took the girl and gave him [the price] for her...4 deben, 1 kit of silver.”

- In a letter from Amenhotep III he orders 40 girls from Milkilu, the Canaanite prince of Gezer, at 40 kit (360 grams) of silver each:
“Behold, I have sent you Hanya, the commissioner of the archers, with merchandise in order to have beautiful concubines, i.e. weavers; silver, gold, garments, turquoises, all sorts of precious stones, chairs of ebony, as well as all good things, worth 160 deben. In total: forty concubines - the price of every concubine is forty of silver. Therefore, send very beautiful concubines without blemish.”
- Another Egyptian record found lists slaves valued at 3 deben and 1 kit (279 grams) each:
“His [slave] Pever, son of...; his slave Ebek, his slave Bupenamonkha; his slave Neshenumeh; his slave, Dene; total of slaves: 6; amounting at 3 deben 1 kit of silver each.”

Injustice in Egypt (Genesis 39-40)

Joseph was sold to Potiphar, officer of Pharaoh, by the Midianites. He was placed in a position of trust. Potiphar’s wife became attracted to him, sought to entice him, and when he resisted her, had him thrown into prison.

- A parallel story is found in the Egyptian Tale of Two Brothers.
 - From the 19th Dynasty, around 1185 BC, comes an Egyptian document, the Papyrus D’Orbiney (fig. 6), which contains the “Story of the Two Brothers.”
 - The older brother’s wife made an attempt to seduce the younger brother while her husband was gone. When the young man failed to submit to her lusts, she accused him to her husband of having attempted to rape her. The outraged husband immediately set out to kill his younger brother, who was able to escape. Later the truth was found out, and the unfaithful wife was killed.
- Since Joseph lived many centuries before the Papyrus D’Orbiney was composed, there is reason to suppose that the later story depends upon the earlier.
- Potiphar is also called an Egyptian and commander of the king’s guard in [Genesis 39:1](#).
 - It is argued that if the king were a Hyksos ruler, it would not make sense for a native Egyptian to have been commander of the royal bodyguard. Further, Joseph is described several times ([Gen 41, 42, and 45](#)) as ruler over all the land of Egypt. The Hyksos controlled only the northern part of Egypt, but the 12th Dynasty ruled the entire nation.

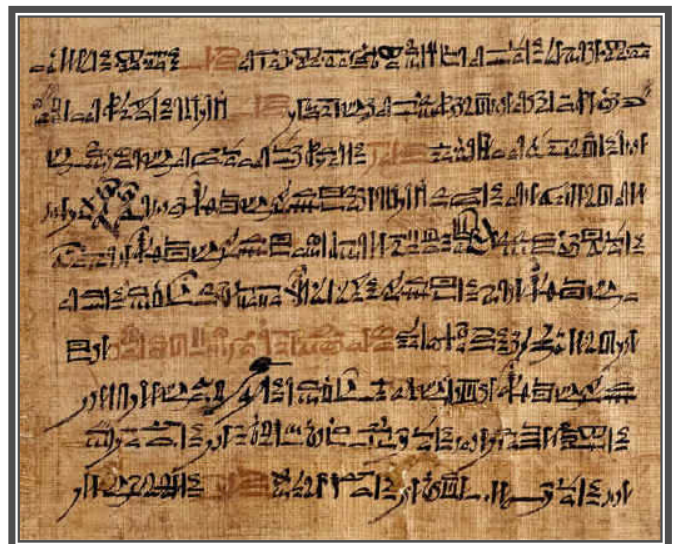


Fig 6. Page of Papyrus D’Orbiney

Joseph also faced disappointment when he favored two of Pharaoh's servants, a butler (cupbearer) and a baker, by interpreting their dreams.

- The interpretations were that the butler would be reinstated to his former position within three days, while the baker would be killed within that time ([Gen. 40:12-23](#)). Both predictions came true.
- The titles "butler" and "baker" derive originally from a time when Pharaoh's court was much simpler. By the time of Joseph, these simple titles had come to refer to high government officials.
- Joseph had specifically requested of the butler to try and affect his release, but the butler promptly forgot Joseph's favor after Pharaoh reinstated him.
 - The titles "cupbearer" and "baker" occur both in [Genesis 40](#) and Egyptian texts.
 - A demotic papyrus, now in the British Museum, tells how prisoners were freed on the anniversary of the accession of Pharaoh, can be compared with [Gen 40:20](#).
 - The Rosetta Stone (fig. 7) also indicates that Pharaoh had a custom of releasing prisoners on his birthday, as the Pharaoh did the butler in [Genesis 40](#).

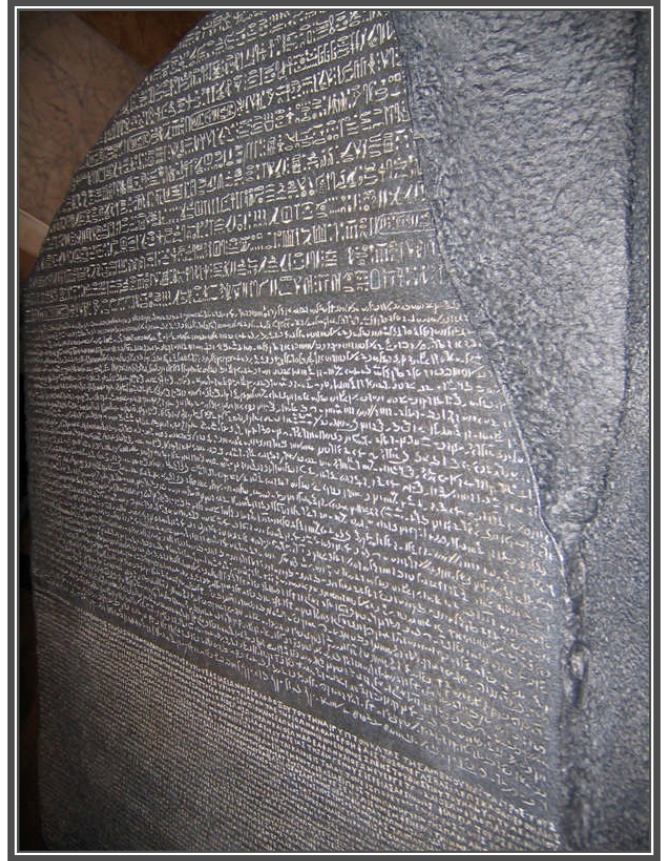


Fig 7. The Rosetta Stone

Honored in Egypt ([Genesis 41](#))

God intervened. Pharaoh dreamed, the butler remembered Joseph, who was then summoned to interpret the Pharaoh's dream.

- Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dream that Egypt would face seven years of abundance followed by seven years of famine and advised Pharaoh that he must find a man to store food during the plentiful years in preparation for the lean years.
- Pharaoh correctly appointed Joseph to the task ([Gen. 41:38-44](#)) and gave him authority next to that of Pharaoh himself.
 - The degree of Joseph's authority is revealed by the freedom he exercised in making decisions, apparently without consulting the Pharaoh. For instance, he set the price the people were to pay for the food, even telling them they could pay in animals when their money was gone and later in land when their animals were gone ([Gen. 47:14-26](#)).
 - Joseph's position as vizier, as described in [Gen 41:41-44](#), is paralleled by records from Egypt, and ancient pictures showing the king in the act of placing golden chains with pectorals around the necks of his high officials.
- Some scholars have objected to the idea of Joseph, a Semite, being elevated to such a high position in Egypt.
 - However, a letter dating from the Amarna period has been found, written to a person in a similar position having a Semitic name.

- Joseph is given the Egyptian name, Zaphenath-paneah, and an Egyptian wife, Asenath, daughter of a priest of the god Ra. Joseph was 37 years old at this time.
- Joseph has two sons by Asenath, Ephraim and Manasseh, who latter took Joseph's place as heads of Israelite tribes ([Gen. 41:50-52](#)).

Under the work of Austrian archaeologist, Manfred Bietak, at Tell el Daba and Qantir these two areas are now the accepted locations of the Biblical city of Ramses and the earlier Hyksos capital of Avaris. One discovery, made between 1984 and 1987 is of extreme significance for the 12th Dynasty historicity of the Joseph Story.

- A palace dating to the 12th Dynasty was found. There is no evidence that the palace was a royal residence, but instead that of a high government official who supervised international trade.
- A cemetery was discovered in the palace garden containing a number of tombs.
- The largest and most impressive tomb, consisting of a single brick chamber with a small chapel in front of it, was oriented to the structures of the 12th Dynasty. The tomb had been robbed, but there was still found a damaged statue.
 - All that remained of the statue were a few fragments of the head. The statue was approximately 1 1/2 times life size, and exhibited no characteristics of a royal person. What was interesting is that this official was clearly an Asiatic as demonstrated by the yellow coloration of the skin and the mushroom hairstyle (fig. 8), both of which were typical for the depiction of male Asiatics.
 - The significance of this find for a 12th Dynasty setting of the Joseph Story is obvious. There is not enough evidence to claim that the tomb of Joseph has been found. But it is clear that this man, without doubt a Canaanite of some kind, became a very important official in the Egyptian government. He was important enough to have lived in a major palace complex. This demonstrates that an Asiatic could indeed rise to a position of prominence in an earlier period than the days of Hyksos rule, and allows us to accept the biblical account that Joseph served a king of the Middle Kingdom at almost exactly the same time as did this Canaanite.



Fig 8. Mushroom Hairstyle

Was the Pharaoh of Joseph Egyptian or Hyksos?

Two points favoring the idea that Joseph's Pharaoh was Egyptian rather than Hyksos are:

1. Pharaoh gave a wife to Joseph ([Gen. 41:45](#)) from the priests of On (Heliopolis), and these priests served the sun god Ra who was disfavored by the Hyksos.
 - a. The argument is that a Hyksos king would have given Joseph the daughter of the priest of another god, such as Seth, who was a more important deity to the Hyksos than the native Egyptian Gods.

2. The requirements of this Pharaoh appear Egyptian in that Joseph shaved ([Gen. 41:14](#)) before going to see him.
 - a. Before Joseph could appear before the king he had to take time to shave himself ([Gen 41:14](#)). Egyptians had clean-shaven faces, and the Egyptian story of Sinuhe tells us how Sinuhe, returning to Egypt after a long exile in Asia, first of all shaved and changed his garments, so as to be considered once more a civilized person.
 - b. This would reflect native Egyptian customs rather than those of the Hyksos.

Do we find Joseph in Egyptian Texts?

There are a number of Biblical passages describing Joseph and the duties he performed that only fit the job description of Vizier. The Vizier, in the Middle Kingdom, was the single most powerful man in Egypt aside from the Pharaoh himself. For example:

1. [Genesis 41:40](#), "Only in the throne will I be greater than you." This was true of only one person, the Vizier.
2. [Genesis 41:41](#), "I have set you over all the land of Egypt."
3. In [Genesis 47:20](#), we have the story of the purchase of the land of the nobility of Egypt by the king. Joseph is the supervisor of this process. It seems natural to view him as a powerful Vizier in this verse and not as some lower official, since ultimate responsibility over lesser governmental officials rested with the Vizier. This incident is probably the Biblical version of the weakening of the provincial Monarchs, which took place in about the middle of the reign of Senusret III.



Fig 9. Joseph the Vizier

If we accept as probable that Joseph was Vizier, we next have to ask if there is room for him in the list of Viziers of the Middle Kingdom, and is there any evidence of his holding that post?

- First of all there is very little information in any dynasty concerning the Viziers.
- For the 50-odd years of the reigns of Senusret II and III there is evidence of two Viziers, Sebekemhat and Khnumhotep, both of whom should be dated to the reign of the later Senusret III. There is another possible Vizier, Amen, for the earlier part of this period, but he cannot be confirmed or dated with any certainty. There is therefore plenty of room for Joseph to have served as Vizier in the 12th Dynasty.
- There is no reason to conclude that either Sebekemhat or Khnumhotep was actually Joseph. There appears to be no similarity between their names and the Hebrew version of Joseph's Egyptian name given in the book of Genesis.
 - There is one interesting thing about the titles held by one of these two Middle Kingdom Viziers. Khnumhotep held both the titles of Vizier and Chief Steward of the King. He is the only known person in Egyptian history to have done so.

- Perhaps, if Joseph was Vizier and Chief Steward in the last years of Senusret II and the early years of Senusret III, it is conceivable that after Joseph's retirement, Khnumhotep could have also have been granted both of these high court positions.
- At the very least we see that the combination is a possibility in the Middle Kingdom.

Israel in Servitude (Exodus 1:8-22)

The king who "*did not know about Joseph*" would have been one of the initial Hyksos kings.

- The Hyksos in the initial stages of control ruled only northeastern Egypt and established Avaris as the capital.
- Goshen was in this area and no doubt was included in the first stages of conquest. The time would have been around 1730 BC, 75 years after Joseph's death.

Slavery Imposed (Exodus 1:8-14)

But now matters changed. Slavery (fig. 10) was imposed on the dwellers of Goshen. Exodus 1:8-10 records the reasons.

1. The new ruler "*did not know about Joseph*"; that is, he did not have historical knowledge of Joseph, nor did he have reason to respect it if he had. He headed a new dynasty of a foreign rule, so that former allegiances or obligations were of little consequence.

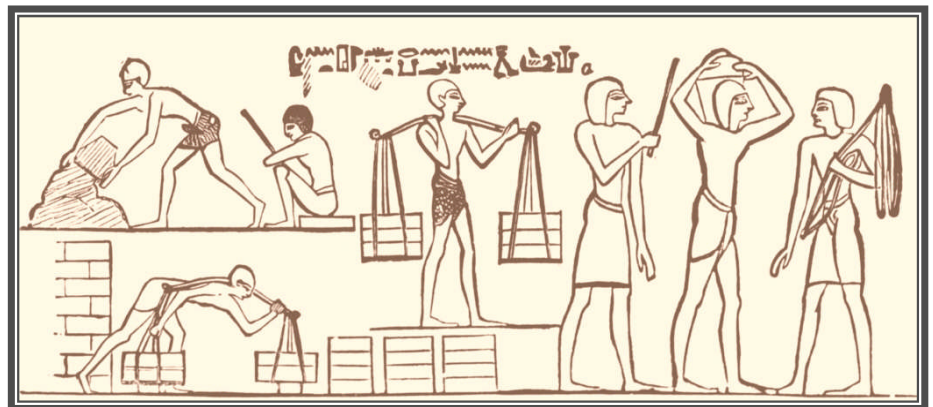


Fig 10. Brick Making

2. Second, Israelites were seen to be more and mightier than the Hyksos. The new ruling family would not have wanted a strong, unified, foreign group to continue unchecked as a potential source of trouble.
3. Third, a military alliance with the former regime was seen as a possible way in which this trouble might come. The deposed rulers, whose dynasty had befriended this group of people, might now call upon them for support in reestablishing their reign.

Accordingly, a decision was made to enslave Israel.

- Their potential for trouble would be removed both by restricting freedom of movement and by placing "slave masters" over them to make sure that all energy was expended in hard labor. This would not only keep them in control but also provide valuable labor for building projects, such as the cities of Pithom and Avaris, the new capital.

Male babies ordered killed (Exodus 1:15-22)

In time another measure was instituted to curtail Israel's growth: all male children were ordered killed. This order was not given by the Hyksos, but by one of the 18th Dynasty Pharaohs.

- This follows from the fact that Moses was born while the order was in effect.
- Since Moses was 80 years old at the time of the Exodus (1446 BC), his birth date may be figured as c.

1526 BC, during the reign of Thutmose I (1539 – 1514).

- Thutmose I was the first great empire builder of Egypt. It was a public order, directed to every Egyptian, that all male children of the Hebrews be thrown in the Nile to drown ([Exod. 1:22](#)).
- Thutmose I was involved in enlarging Egypt's borders, which meant that most of his army was out of the country for extensive periods of time. He did not want this foreign people to increase and become still a greater threat while his home force was so small.

BIBLICAL EVIDENCE OF THE 430-YEAR EGYPTIAN SOJOURN

While in Egypt, Abraham's descendants grew to the size of a nation. Up to this time fulfillment of God's promise of "*descendants like the sands of the sea*" had been very slow, but during this period it was very rapid. When Moses led Israel across Egypt's border at the time of the Exodus, Jacob's 70 had become more than 2,000,000.

Correlating Biblical history with Egyptian history requires the establishment of two key pieces of data:

1. Duration of the Egyptian sojourn
2. The date of the Exodus.

- Exodus 12:40

[Exodus 12:40](#) gives 430 years for the Egyptian sojourn. It reads:

EX 12:40 Now the time that the sons of Israel lived in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years.

[Exodus 12:40 \(NASB\)](#)

- Genesis 15:13

God predicted to Abraham that his descendants would be would be "*oppressed four hundred years.*"

GE 15:13 God said to Abram, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years.

[Genesis 15:13 \(NASB\)](#)

As to the figure used here being 400, rather than the more exact 430 of [Exodus 12:40](#), this is a rounded number, something not uncommon in Scripture.

- Acts 7:6-7

Stephen used language similar to Genesis when he spoke before the Sanhedrin and referred to God's warning that Israel would be treated ill in a strange land 400 years.

AC 7:6 "But God spoke to this effect, that his DESCENDANTS WOULD BE ALIENS IN A FOREIGN LAND, AND THAT THEY WOULD BE ENSLAVED AND MISTREATED FOR FOUR HUNDRED YEARS.

AC 7:7 " 'AND WHATEVER NATION TO WHICH THEY WILL BE IN BONDAGE I MYSELF WILL JUDGE,' said God, 'AND AFTER THAT THEY WILL COME OUT AND SERVE ME IN THIS PLACE.'

[Acts 7:6-7 \(NASB\)](#)

Since Stephen said essentially the same thing as Genesis, similar arguments may be drawn from his words.

- Population Increase

In [Numbers 1:2](#) God commands Moses to take a census. According to [Numbers 1:45-46](#), there are 603,550 men from 20 years and up able to go to war.

NU 1:45 So all the numbered men of the sons of Israel by their fathers' households, from twenty years old and upward, whoever was *able to go out to war* in Israel,

NU 1:46 even all the numbered men were 603,550.

[Numbers 1:45-46 \(NASB\)](#)

- Added to this should be an equal number of women, 603,500.
- Also added should be the number of those under 20 years of age, normally 60% of those over 20 (by modern day statistics), or 720,000.
- This would make the total size of Israel 1,920,000. The actual number was probably between 2,000,000 and 2,500,000 because the ratio of children was higher during this time than modern day statistics, families tended to have large numbers of children.

It would not be possible for Jacob's family to multiply to over 2,000,000 people in a period of less than 430 years.

Mathematically this increase in 430 years is possible under God's blessing, the birth rate being kept high, and the death rate low.

- The historian Josephus (fig. 11) also refers to Israel's 400-year sojourn in Egypt.
 - *"And after four hundred years did they spend under these afflictions; for they strove one against the other which should get the mastery, the Egyptians desiring to destroy the Israelites by these labors, and the Israelites desiring to hold out to the end under them."*

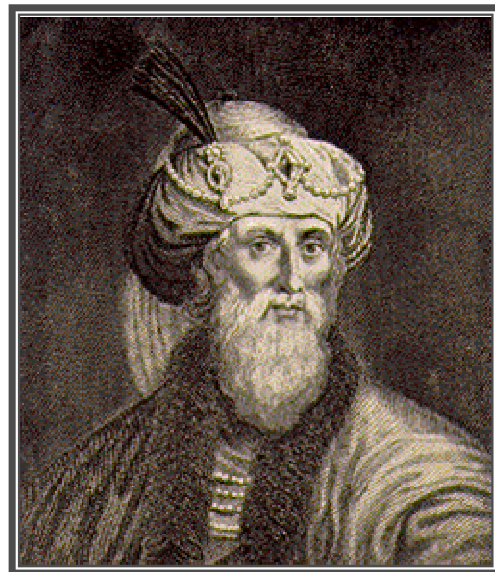


Fig 11. Josephus

CONCLUSION

Joseph died at the age of 110 (Gen. 50:26), 54 years after Jacob. His body was embalmed and remained in Egypt until the Exodus, when Israel took it along for final burial in Canaan (Exod. 13:9).

In conclusion, we have attempted to make the case that Joseph's career fits well in the 12th Dynasty, both Biblically and historically, and that there is no good reason to try to place him in the later Second Intermediate Period. He did make a significant impact on Egyptian history, an impact that is reflected in events such as the breaking of the power of the Monarchs and the combining of the offices of Vizier and Chief Steward of the King. As our knowledge of the Middle Kingdom increases, and as new archeological information from the delta is discovered and published, we can expect to understand both the Middle Kingdom and the Second Intermediate Period better, and we can expect to expand our knowledge of the Egyptian background of the Story of Joseph.

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