

The Egyptian Setting of the Joseph Story

How accurate is the setting of this story?

- What we have in the story of Joseph is a very good reflection of what we know about Egyptian life in this time period.
- Many clues tell us that this is a story that sounds right when we look at what we know about Egypt during this time.

About Egypt

The central feature of Egypt, one which has always determined its destiny, is the Nile.

- Nearly all the population in Egypt was along the banks of the Nile and in the Nile Delta, where the river meets the Mediterranean Sea.
- In Egypt, there have historically been two main geographic sections: Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt. What confuses people is that Upper Egypt is in the South. These names are based on the flow of the Nile.
- The Egyptians thought of themselves as the Two Lands, Upper and Lower Egypt.
- Sometime around 3000 B.C., it is believed that a king united these two lands.
- When Egypt became powerful enough at different times in history, they would become rivals to the empires in the East. The people of Canaan and later Israel might come under the dominion of Egypt or the others, depending on who was the strongest at the time.
- In Hebrew, Egypt is *Mizraim*, which may mean *the two fortresses*. Even today, Egypt is called *Mizraim* in Hebrew, and *Mitzr* in Arabic. Our word *Egypt* comes from the Greeks, and it was said to mean *the land south of the Aegean Sea*.

- Pharaoh means “great house,” and so the word originally referred to the palace.
- The very long history of Egypt was divided into a number of dynasties and larger periods of history called kingdoms. It’s probable that Joseph was in the period known as the Middle Kingdom, which lasted from about 2055 to 1650 BC.

In Potiphar’s House (Gen. 39:1-6)

1 Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. And Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him down there. 2 The LORD was with Joseph, and he was a successful man; and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian. 3 And his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD made all he did to prosper in his hand. 4 So Joseph found favor in his sight, and served him. Then he made him overseer of his house, and all that he had he put under his authority. 5 So it was, from the time that he had made him overseer of his house and all that he had, that the LORD blessed the Egyptian’s house for Joseph’s sake; and the blessing of the LORD was on all that he had in the house and in the field. 6 Thus he left all that he had in Joseph’s hand, and he did not know what he had except for the bread which he ate.

- Potiphar is probably head of the palace bodyguard. (Chief executioner?)
- We immediately see that God is with Joseph. In the story of Judah, we know that God was working through His hidden providence, but in Joseph’s life, there would be obvious blessing. God put an anointing for success on him.
- Potiphar was blessed because of Joseph, both in the house and in the field. This means that Potiphar had lands that were farmed, and that was likely the source of his wealth. Joseph was put over everything, making him a chief steward.

- The blessing on Joseph was so obvious that Potiphar could see that there was something supernatural about it.

Temptation (Gen. 39:6b-10)

Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance. 7 And it came to pass after these things that his master’s wife cast longing eyes on Joseph, and she said, “Lie with me.” 8 But he refused and said to his master’s wife, “Look, my master does not know what is with me in the house, and he has committed all that he has to my hand. 9 There is no one greater in this house than I, nor has he kept back anything from me but you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?” 10 So it was, as she spoke to Joseph day by day, that he did not heed her, to lie with her or to be with her.

- Potiphar’s wife boldly comes every day, and asks him to come to bed with her.
- Adultery was a grave sin in those societies. Joseph knew that holiness and justice towards others demanded that he not do this. He did not allow his passions to go unchecked without using his godly reasoning.
- He reminded himself and her that this would be not only adultery but a sin of ingratitude.
- He also calls it wickedness and, significantly, a sin against God.
- This was the victory that he had: accurately seeing the sin for what it was. He had the fear of the Lord which the Bible tells us is the beginning of all wisdom.
- Notice also that he didn’t toy with the temptation.

Accusation (Gen. 39:11-15)

11 But it happened about this time, when Joseph went into the house to do his work, and none of the men of the house was inside, 12 that she caught him by his garment, saying, “Lie with me.” But he left his garment in her hand, and fled and ran outside. 13 And so it was, when she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and fled outside, 14 that she called to the men of her house and spoke to them, saying, “See, he has brought in to us a Hebrew to mock us. He came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice. 15 And it happened, when he heard that I lifted my voice and cried out, that he left his garment with me, and fled and went outside.”

- Joseph was following the counsel of the Word of God that says to *flee fornication*.
- There is a denigration of Joseph here because he is a Hebrew, not an Egyptian. Hebrews were considered to be unclean.

Sent To Prison (Gen. 39:16-20)

16 So she kept his garment with her until his master came home. 17 Then she spoke to him with words like these, saying, “The Hebrew servant whom you brought to us came in to me to mock me; 18 so it happened, as I lifted my voice and cried out, that he left his garment with me and fled outside.” 19 So it was, when his master heard the words which his wife spoke to him, saying, “Your servant did to me after this manner,” that his anger was aroused. 20 Then Joseph’s master took him and put him into the prison, a place where the king’s prisoners were confined. And he was there in the prison.

- The word mocking here is probably more like humiliating.
- Potiphar was in charge of the guards, or was the chief of the executioners, and so the fact that Joseph was put in prison rather than being killed is interesting.

- Humanly speaking, Potiphar perhaps had great affection for Joseph and didn't want to see him put to death. It's very possible that he didn't believe his wife.

Mercy From Heaven (Gen. 39:21-23)

21 But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him mercy, and He gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. 22 And the keeper of the prison committed to Joseph's hand all the prisoners who were in the prison; whatever they did there, it was his doing. 23 The keeper of the prison did not look into anything that was under Joseph's authority, because the LORD was with him; and whatever he did, the LORD made it prosper.

- The primary character here is not Joseph, but the Lord.
- God was with him, God showed him mercy, and gave him favor. The result was that Joseph ended up in the same arrangement he had enjoyed before.
- God was training Joseph for a future in administration.
- God not only was with Joseph but gave him a supernatural anointing for success here, too. Whatever he did, God caused it to prosper.
- It's highly significant that this is the only place in the story of Joseph where we see the personal and covenant name of God, as Yahweh (capitalized in some versions).
- Joseph was being blessed and prospered by the covenant God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the One who wants to fully reveal Himself and who wants to act in history for the good of His people.

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