

Joseph's Era

Article for Unit Two

Joseph lived during the Middle Bronze Age, a period dating from roughly 2000 to 1550 B.C. (We call it the Bronze Age because the leading technology involved the use of bronze, an alloy of copper and tin.) Scholars disagree on whether he lived toward the beginning of this period or toward the end. Genesis 30:24-25 tells us that Joseph was born in Aram (Syria), but as a young man moved with his family to Canaan, what we now know as Israel.

Joseph in Canaan

Canaan at that time was not a single nation, but a collection of cities that functioned as independent states. Early in the Middle Bronze period, these Canaanite settlements were small and unfortified, but they eventually grew into larger, fortified towns. Though rich in wine, oil, wood, copper, and turquoise, the region's greatest advantage was its trade routes running north and south. These routes—one that hugged the Mediterranean Sea coast and another that traversed the region east of the Jordan River—connected Egypt with the continents of Europe and Asia. Remember the Ishmaelite traders who bought Joseph? They were passing through Canaan on their way from Gilead to Egypt (Genesis 37:25).

Joseph in Egypt

Most of Joseph's 110 years were spent in Egypt, first as the slave of an Egyptian official, then as an important Egyptian official himself. Egypt was the most important country in this region. It was its breadbasket, a reliable source of grain. Abraham came there during a famine in Canaan (Genesis 12:10) as did Jacob and his sons. (Isaac apparently intended to do so but God forbade him [Genesis 26:2].) It was also the location of important trade routes from Canaan into Africa. Egypt's artery of life was the Nile River, which flows 4,000 miles north from Africa before emptying into the Mediterranean Sea through the "fingers" of the Nile Delta. The Israelites would settle in the region of the Delta known as the land of Goshen (Genesis 45:10; 46:28) also called the land of Ramses (Genesis 47:11-12).

By the time Joseph arrived, Egypt had already been an important nation for more than a millennium. Ancient Egyptians took great pride in the stability of their country, considering the fractious city-states as weak. Their own country had resulted from the uniting of upper and lower Egypt, unity they celebrated by calling the ruling pharaoh "Lord of the Two Lands." The great pyramids near modern Cairo were already over 500 years old, built not by Hebrew slaves, but by Egyptians conscripted for the task, as one might be drafted to go to war. They were built as burial locations for the pharaoh, the Egyptian monarch. Much of Egyptian life revolved around life after death. Not just the king, but many officials built tombs that remain impressive even in ruins. Their grandeur is not surprising since one's tomb was what one worked for and invested in. Your tomb represented your life to all who came behind you. How surprising, then, it must have been when Jacob and Joseph refused to build tombs, insisting instead on burial in Canaan.

Egypt in the Middle Bronze Age

The Middle Bronze Age approximately corresponds to what are known as Egypt's Middle Kingdom (2040-1674 B.C.) and the Second Intermediate Period (1674-1553 B.C.). The Middle Kingdom, Egypt's classical period, was a time of stability, impressive buildings, and great literature. Later Egyptians looked back to this peaceful time as the perfect model.

Everything that happened in Canaan was of interest to the Egyptians, especially during the unstable Second Intermediate Period. Those ruling Egypt toward the end of this period—the Hyskos—were not native Egyptians. They had come from Asia and eventually worked their way into power. During their rule, a significant number of Asiatics arrived in Egypt to settle in the Nile Delta. After Pharaoh Ahmose ended Hyskos rule around 1550 B.C., the Egyptians invaded Canaan to exert more direct military and commercial control, which they did for the next three centuries. Some call these centuries the age of Egyptian empire, the time of more familiar names like Tuthmosis III; Tutankhamen; Ramses II; and the female pharaoh, Hatshepsut. During the New Kingdom, Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt.

Joseph's Interpretation of Dreams

Joseph's meteoric rise to power in Pharaoh's court had much to do with his ability to interpret dreams, first those of his fellow prisoners and then the dreams of Pharaoh himself. By Joseph's time, dream interpretation was a well-developed science in Egypt, complete with textbooks. One such interpretation manual offers the following explanations for what it means if a person dreams that he or she is:

- ... seeing the god who is above. Good. It means much food.
 - ... eating the flesh of a donkey. Good. It means a promotion is coming.
 - ... seeing him or herself dead. Good. A long life lies before him or her.
 - ... submerging in the Nile. Good. It means purification from all evil.
 - ... chewing cucumber. Bad. It means quarreling occurs when he or she is met.
 - ... seeing his or her face in a mirror. Bad. It means another spouse. ("Dream Oracles," *The Context of Scripture*, vol. 1: *Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World*, ed. by William W. Hallo, [Leiden: Brill, 1997], 53-54.)
- Pharaoh's dream involved a seven-year famine. Joseph's counsel to collect and store grain resonated with Pharaoh and his counselors. They knew the importance of grain storage to protect the nation from the Nile's irregularities. That Joseph understood this, too, helps explain why he was so quickly entrusted with so much authority, being promoted to the rank of Grand Vizier (Genesis 41:41). How significant that at a time of national catastrophe for Egypt, God would place one of His faithful servants into this important role.

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