



DIGGING DEEPER

WEEK 4

Walk Like an Egyptian



Returning from a foreign country reminds me how comforting the familiar sights, sounds, and smells of home can be. On a recent trip to Kenya, I enjoyed tasting new foods, hearing different languages, and admiring the brilliant colors and patterns of the clothing. Yet thoughts of the people back home were never far from my mind. I wondered what my family and friends were doing, eating, and experiencing. Imagine Joseph's first glimpse at the land of Egypt. The new sights and sounds must have been quite an adjustment. Not only did he miss his father and have wounds to heal from his brothers' betrayal, but he also had to adjust to a whole new culture.

The women of Israel were known for their modesty of dress. Joseph's eyes likely hadn't seen bare arms and ankles very often. New architecture, strange spices in the food, and sounds of new languages would have been a shock to his system. What do we learn from the biblical account of Joseph's saga about ancient Egypt? Does archeology and literature of the time contradict or confirm the Egyptian details found in Genesis 37-50? Why does it matter?

Understanding what it could have been like for Joseph to "walk like an Egyptian" has two primary benefits for us as students of God's Word.

Benefit #1: Seeing Joseph as a Real Person

The first benefit of understanding what it was like for Joseph to live in Egyptian culture is that it helps us to see him as a real person adjusting to life in a foreign land. My first impressions of Joseph were that of a little boy on a flannel graph with a striped coat. I didn't think of him as a living, breathing person with real emotions, needs, and a wardrobe consisting of more than a colorful robe. Another temptation for some of us might be to think of him as a dancing, singing character in "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat" rather than an actual person who lived in a real period of history. As we learn about the Egypt of Joseph's day, we're reminded that he must have struggled with life in a foreign land. We can identify with Joseph living in Egypt as we recognize that we are foreigners here on earth. Philippians 3:20a tells us, "But we are citizens of heaven, where the Lord Jesus Christ lives." The sights and sounds of this earth bring us joy, but we have a sense of longing for our true home, which is not on this earth.

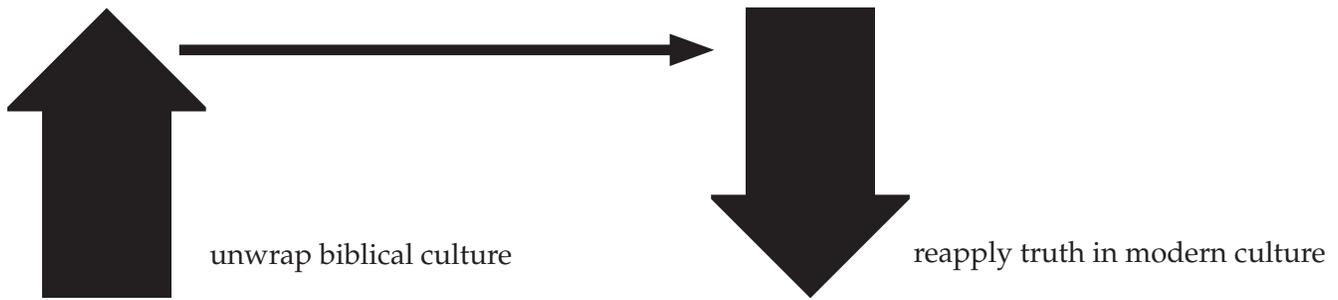
Benefit #2: Bringing Greater Clarity to Joseph's Life and Circumstances

A second benefit of understanding the Egyptian culture in which Joseph lived is that it brings greater clarity to his life and circumstances. Understanding the customs and cultures of the ancient world helps us to better unwrap the spiritual truths from biblical stories to see God's heart in clearer context. Then we can reapply those universal truths in our own culture, as the following diagram illustrates.

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Universal Truth Applicable in All Times and Cultures



In order to properly unwrap the manners and customs of Joseph's story to uncover the universal spiritual truths, we must first know and understand the people, places, and practices of the time and culture in which he lived. Let's briefly consider the Egypt Joseph entered and see how archeology and historical writings confirm the Genesis account.

Time Period

Scholars debate whether Joseph arrived in Egypt during the Middle Kingdom (2000-1786 B.C.) under the twelfth dynasty or during the Second Intermediate Period (1786-1570 B.C.) when the Asiatic Hyksos took over Egypt. Let's consider each possibility.

Josephus referred to the Hyksos as the leaders during the time of Joseph.¹ The Hyksos were not Egyptian and would seem more likely to place a foreigner such as Joseph into power. However, the Hyksos ruled only the Delta region of Egypt,² whereas the biblical text refers to Joseph as second in command of *all* Egypt (Genesis 41:40-41). Also, the prevalent god during the Hyksos reign was Set,³ yet Joseph was rewarded with a wife who was the daughter of a priest of On, Potiphera (Genesis 41:45). On was connected with Re, who was paramount during the Middle Kingdom.

There are some other clues that suggest Joseph entered Egypt during the Middle Kingdom rather than the Second Intermediate Period. Here are a few of those clues:

- **The Middle Kingdom was a time of administrative reform, when local nobility (nomarchs) lost their power to a stronger central government ruled by Pharaoh. The possibility exists that Pharaoh gained political control of historically independent nomarchs through Joseph's plan outlined in Genesis 47, which included the people selling themselves as slaves and giving one fifth of every harvest back to Pharaoh (see Genesis 47:20-24).⁴**
- **The Middle Kingdom was characterized by great material wealth.⁵**
- **Egyptian texts reveal that slavery of Syro-Palestinian peoples, such as Joseph, was growing during the Middle Kingdom.⁶**
- **Archeology has revealed through the Hieratic Papyrus that several non-Egyptian slaves with names similar to those found in the Old Testament were owned by wealthy individuals such as Potiphar mentioned in Genesis.⁷**
- **"Asiatic household servants were among the most common in Egypt during the Middle Kingdom. Joseph fits the pattern well, beginning his servitude as a domestic servant alongside others of his nationality."⁸**
- **First Kings 6:1 tells us that the Exodus occurred 480 years before Solomon built the Temple in the fourth year of his reign. This timeline is used to date Joseph's story in Egypt under the Middle Kingdom.⁹**

By looking back into historical documents and archaeological artifacts, we find confirmation of the biblical record in the Joseph account. This information also helps us form a theory about the time period in which the narrative takes place, giving us greater insight into the customs and political climate that form the backdrop of Joseph's story.

Egyptian Prisons

Prisons were an element of Egyptian culture that lines up with the Genesis account of Joseph. In Israelite history, we find little mention of prisons. God laid out consequences that didn't include prison sentences. "The death penalty, a fine, or even bodily mutilation were the usual means of making people suffer for their crimes in the ancient Near East. Prisons were rare in the ancient world. Egypt was one of the few nations in the ancient Near East that had prisons in the classical sense of the term."¹⁰

The concept of prison might have been very foreign to Joseph prior to his own imprisonment. He probably would not have seen anything like it. This first biblical mention of prison in Genesis 39 lines up perfectly with what we find in Egyptian history. One scholar writes, "We are very fortunate to have an Egyptian papyrus, translated and published by the Egyptologist W. C. Hayes, that deals at length with Egyptian prisons."¹¹ In this document we find that prisons often held people awaiting death, similar to Joseph's inmates the cupbearer and the baker. Another source notes, "The Rosetta Stone [a stone with Egyptian hieroglyphs] indicates that Pharaoh had a custom of releasing prisoners on his birthday, as the Pharaoh did the butler in Genesis 40."¹² We also find that Egyptian prisons usually had a scribe to keep records. "Since Joseph was literate, as we have seen from the fact that he served as steward in the household of Potiphar, it seems probable that he was promoted to Scribe of the Prison."¹³ The more we uncover from ancient documents, the more we see the accuracy not only of Joseph's story but of all the Bible.

Egyptian Customs

Other elements of Egyptian culture that line up with Joseph's story in Genesis are the practices of shaving, cleanliness, and general care for appearance. This explains why Joseph had to prepare to go see Pharaoh when coming up from the dungeon. Although Pharaoh wanted to see him right away, he could not enter his presence without making himself more presentable as was the custom of Egyptians. By the time his brothers came to visit Egypt, Joseph wasn't recognizable as an Israelite but looked more like an Egyptian. He learned to embrace a foreign culture without compromising his faith. He adapted to the customs that didn't go against God's law, however Joseph still held fast to his faith in the God of his fathers. He learned how to navigate the difficulties of embracing the culture without losing himself or his reliance on the one true God.

Living as Strangers in a Foreign Land

While God may not be calling us to spend decades in another country, we can identify with Joseph. We are citizens of heaven living on earth. Like Joseph, we must learn the language, customs, and culture of those we live among. God has great purpose in our pilgrimage here. He wants to use us as His instruments to help others. Joseph took a foreign job, wife, and name but kept his heart committed to God. He learned to walk like an Egyptian in the culture where God placed him without embracing the sin and idolatry of those around him.

Where has God placed you? In your home, workplace, and community, God has a purpose for you. Like Joseph, each of us must learn to live where God has placed us in order to accomplish His plans for us. Jesus prayed this for us in John 17:15-16: "I'm not asking you to take them out of the world, but to keep them safe from the evil one. They do not belong to this world any more than I do." Like Joseph, we must navigate this world, living how God would have us live without being influenced by the evil around us.

I'm sure this wasn't always easy for Joseph. He needed a close relationship with God to know which aspects of his foreign culture to embrace and which to distance himself from in order to keep away from evil. As a leader, he walked a fine line. We too need God's help to know how to live in this world without allowing it to diminish our faith. While God may not call us to walk like an Egyptian, He promises to guide us. "The LORD says, 'I will guide you along the best pathway for your life. / I will advise you and watch over you'" (Psalm 32:8). Even as strangers in a foreign land, we know that He promises to help us every step of the way until He brings us home.

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