The Narrative of Joseph in Egypt is one of the most beloved stories in the Bible. Countless children have listened with keen interest to the story of how God worked in the life of a Hebrew slave who rose to a high position in Egypt. Both young and old listen with anticipation at the turn of events that brought Joseph to Egypt and then to his elevation to Pharaoh's second-in-command. Some people might be tempted to view the narrative of Joseph as merely an enchanting tale that teaches a moral. It is much more than that, however. The Joseph story consists of an historical narrative that reflects the particular culture and society of ancient Egypt. Exactly how does Joseph fit into the known societal structure and history of Egypt?

The Hierarchy of Egyptian Society

Pharaoh—The pharaoh was the supreme head over Egypt. The word translated "pharaoh" appeared around 2500 B.C. and meant "great house." However, by 1500 B.C., the name indicated a title for the inhabitant of the house, that is, the king. As the name is used in Scripture, "pharaoh" merely indicates the king of Egypt. The earliest biblical narratives do not mentioned a personal name with the word "pharaoh." By the time of Solomon (about 1000 B.C.), the pharaohs would often be mentioned by name (such as Pharaoh Neco in 2 Kings 23:29).

The Egyptians viewed the pharaoh as the living embodiment of the falcon-god Horus. Pharaoh was thus a god in the eyes of the Egyptians. As the incarnation of Horus, the pharaoh spoke with divine authority. Egyptian theology saw the king (most pharaohs were "kings," though three women served as pharaoh) as being the only one who could prevent disaster in the land, as well as the one who maintained proper order. He guaranteed the land's

Right: Egyptian figurine of donkeys carrying grain to granary. Dates to the early middle kingdom. During the famine, Joseph was put in charge of grain storage and distribution (Gen. 41).

Lesson Reference

BSFL: Genesis 50:15-21

By Harold R. Mosley
fertility because of his connection to the Nile River. Upon the pharaoh’s death, he was worshiped as Osiris, the god of the underworld. The new pharaoh then became the living Horus as he ascended to power over Egypt.

All power in Egypt came ultimately from the pharaoh. In theory, he owned all land, livestock, and people. In practice, however, the same families often worked the land for generations, thus giving the practical benefit of private ownership of the land. The pharaoh maintained authority over every aspect of Egyptian life. In essence, the pharaoh was not only the head of Egypt; he was the embodiment of Egypt.

Although the pharaoh functioned as the divine ruler, he obviously could not perform every function himself. A complex system of government developed within Egypt where various departments oversaw the vast empire. The pharaoh maintained ultimate control of the government, since every office operated at his whim. He appointed all major officers, who in turn appointed other officers beneath them.

Egyptian religion had the pharaoh as its focal point, with the king functioning as the ultimate high priest. Only the pharaoh could intercede directly to the gods. Temples to the various Egyptian deities existed, each with its own high priest appointed by the pharaoh and each priesthood being supported by the pharaoh. All of these temples were staffed with several layers of priests and attendants. As the number of temples increased over the generations, the number of priests and temple staff supported by the Egyptian king came to number in the tens of thousands.

Vizier—Next to the pharaoh, the vizier served as the most powerful individual in Egypt. The earliest indication of this particular office comes from around 2600 B.C., although records reveal little of the position until around 2000 B.C. At times, two viziers would share responsibilities of service with one operating in the southern region and another having authority in the northern region. As the pharaoh’s chief representative, the vizier held great power and influence over all the land.

The precise duties of vizier seem to have varied, depending on the administration of each pharaoh. Even though records mentioning viziers date far back into Egyptian history, the clearest information regarding the responsibilities of the position comes from the vizier Rekhmire of the Eighteenth Dynasty (about 1450 B.C.). Rekhmire referred to himself as “second to the king,” “the heart of the king,” and “the ears and eyes of the sovereign.” The vizier was indeed “second to the king” in authority. “He was treasurer, chief
justice, high priest, chief architect, and the king’s closest advisor.” His responsibilities consisted of maintaining civil order, assessing and collecting taxes, preserving the state archives, mobilizing troops as needed, appointing officials, and monitoring natural phenomena, such as flooding of the Nile. The viziers themselves did not possess the necessary skills to perform all the functions for which they were responsible. Thus each vizier appointed the skilled persons necessary to carry out his numerous tasks.

The Skilled Class—A large class of skilled and educated individuals developed in Egypt that consisted of craftsmen, artisans, and scribes. These individuals lived in communities concentrated around the centers of population that required the specific skills possessed by the craftsmen. These positions of skill were generally hereditary in nature and were learned from members of the immediate family through apprenticeships.

The scribes formed an important part of the skilled class. Their task involved making careful notation of seemingly every detail of daily Egyptian life. Records exist indicating the size of herds, the grain harvested, the amounts of seed and materials issued from storage, types of manufactured goods, supplies requested by artisans, and extensive other minute details and records. These meticulous records helped with the administration and taxation of the land. Interestingly, the annual flooding levels of the Nile formed the basis for the system of taxation in Egypt. Based on past experience, flooding to a certain level typically produced a certain yield of crops. Tax assessments and revenue came, not from what farmers and families actually produced, but from what yield should have been produced from that year’s flooding.

Society’s Lower Classes—At the bottom of Egyptian society were the peasants. This segment of Egypt’s population formed by far the largest group of people. Because these individuals possessed no particular skills that made them valuable to the pharaoh, they enjoyed none of the privileges afforded the higher social classes, despite the fact that they produced food for the entire country. No real chance existed for the peasants to advance to a higher social standing. Slaves formed the lowest of the social classes. Extensive slavery did not exist in Egypt’s earliest days. In fact, the pyramids, which date to around 2500 B.C., were not built primarily with slave labor. Rather, the three months of Nile flooding allowed the conscription of the peasant class for work in the various building projects of the pharaoh. With the advent of the “New Kingdom” (in 1570 B.C.), however, slavery began to increase. Slaves consisted originally of foreign captives of war. This group often engaged in the large-scale building projects of the various pharaohs.
Israel’s slavery in Egypt fits well into this time frame.

What Was Joseph’s Role?
The precise placement of Joseph and the Israelites into Egyptian history persists as an unanswered question. The Genesis account clearly reveals Israel’s presence in Egypt. However, because the narrative mentions no specific individual who can be placed into Egypt’s known history, Joseph cannot be placed with certainty into any particular time period. In spite of the lack of clarity as to the exact date of Joseph, the Egyptian context in the story of Joseph cannot be denied.

The Genesis narrative does not preserve the translations for the precise Egyptian titles given to Joseph. Rather, the attempt of the Hebrew text is to describe the titles given to him. Because of this, scholars disagree regarding the exact position Joseph achieved. The gist of the story in Genesis, however, seems to indicate Joseph rose to the position of vizier. The most convincing statement for Joseph’s position as a vizier is Pharaoh’s declaration in Genesis 41:40: “Only in the throne will I be greater than you.”

Also the reference to Joseph riding in the “second chariot” (v. 43) pictures him as second-in-command to the pharaoh. The known duties of the vizier mesh well with the stated responsibilities of Joseph. The vizier held responsibility for the oversight of the royal granaries. Joseph presided over the gathering of the excess harvests in the seven years of plenty (vv. 47-49). During those years he stored the grain, and in the lean years that followed, he opened the storehouses to sell the grain. Again, the pharaoh’s words indicate the authority of Joseph over Egypt as the keeper of the storehouses: “Go to Joseph. That which he says to you, do” (v. 55).

The title of “father to Pharaoh” (45:8) indicates Joseph’s close advisory role for the king. Although the title could refer to a physical relationship, a common usage of the term indicated an advisory function. The title appeared often in reference to viziers.

One particular duty of the vizier figures prominently in the Joseph story. After the famine had become severe in Canaan, Jacob sent 10 of his sons to Egypt to buy food. There, they appeared before Joseph (42:6-26). The function of vizier required that he receive foreign embassies. Joseph seems to have been functioning in this capacity when the brothers came before him.

The Genesis story points to the conclusion that Joseph indeed served as vizier, that is, the second-in-command to the pharaoh. This high position for Joseph played a role in God’s plan for Israel. Years later, Joseph told his brothers: “You, on your part, thought evil against me; God thought it for good” (50:20). God had given Joseph authority in Egypt second only to the pharaoh in order to accomplish His purpose for Israel.

Left: King stands to the right and offers Ma’at to the god Amon Re (wearing two plumes) in the inner hall at Abu Simbel. The pharaoh operated as high priest for his people.

5. Brier and Hobbs, 63.
6. Ibid., 68.
7. Ibid.
9. Brier and Hobbs, 66. The southern region is often designated as “Upper Egypt,” and the northern area is called “Lower Egypt.”
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 77-78.
14. Ibid., 73.
15. Scripture quotations within this article are the writer’s own translation.
17. Ibid., 47-48.
18. Ibid., 49.

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