

CHAPTER 7: The Middle Kingdom; Joseph, Part I

❧ WORLD HISTORY ❧

This chapter takes us back to a land that we haven't visited in a while: Egypt. Chapter 2 ended with a look at some of Egypt's great pyramids. Now we'll take a closer look at the greatest of all: the **Great Pyramid of Giza**, a.k.a. the **Pyramid of Khufu**.

~ Inside the Great Pyramid ~

We'll start by reviewing the measurements. The Great Pyramid has a square base that measures 756 feet on each side. That puts its perimeter at 3,024 feet, well over half a mile; and its area at almost 572,000 square feet, just over 13 acres. That whole area is covered with massive blocks of solid stone—some 2.3 million of them in all, ramping up to a peak more than 450 feet high. Its height was even greater long ago, when it still had its **pyramidion**.

A **pyramidion** was a shiny capstone that stood atop a pyramid.

Besides being incredibly massive, the Great Pyramid is also incredibly precise. For example, its north face doesn't just point vaguely northward. It points exactly true north, with a degree of precision so high that it took an expert surveyor like Flinders Petrie to measure the error. The Great Pyramid is also precisely level. Anyone who has ever tried to lay stone knows how hard it is to keep it straight and level; yet the Egyptians leveled thirteen acres of stone to within about one-half inch. All this they managed around 2580 BC, almost 300 years before Sargon the Great!

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Another feat of precision was the fit of the stones, especially the casing stones. When the Great Pyramid was first finished, it had a smooth casing of polished white limestone. Skilled masons fit its casing stones together so tightly that they almost looked seamless, as if the whole pyramid were one solid mass. Only its builders knew the secrets that lay hidden behind that flawless skin.

A **caliph** was a successor of Muhammad, the prophet who founded Islam in AD 622 (Year Two).

The Curious Journey of Caliph al-Ma'mun

The story of how those secrets were revealed comes from medieval times. The glory days of ancient Egypt were long past by the AD 830s, when a curious **caliph** called **al-Ma'mun** decided to tunnel into the Great Pyramid—looking for hidden treasures. Ma'mun ruled the **Abbasid Caliphate**, an Islamic government that claimed authority over all Muslims everywhere. Since Muslims disdained polytheists, Ma'mun saw no sacrilege in violating the tomb of a polytheist like Khufu.

Just how Ma'mun knew where to start, no one now knows. Perhaps he had inside information, or perhaps he just got lucky. Either way, he chose the perfect place to start: on the north face of the Great Pyramid, about thirty feet above ground level.

The Great Pyramid as it appears today



The next step was knowing the right direction, which required another stroke of luck. Ma'mun used a battering ram to pound his way into the Great Pyramid, crushing its relatively soft limestone to rubble. He was headed in the wrong direction when he heard something unexpected. It sounded like his pounding had loosened something heavy farther in, causing it to fall.

Turning toward the sound, Ma'mun broke through to the intersection of two hidden passages: one ascending, the other descending. Looking back up the descending passage, he found that it led to an unseen opening in the north face of the Great Pyramid—about thirty feet above the one he had just made. Its door blended into the casing stones so seamlessly that everyone had missed it until now.

The lower end of the descending passage turned out to be a disappointment. About 350 feet from the north face, it opened into a small, unfinished chamber cut into the bedrock. Perhaps Khufu had intended to be buried there, as other pharaohs were buried deep beneath their pyramids. If so, then perhaps he changed his mind; for his mummy was nowhere to be found.

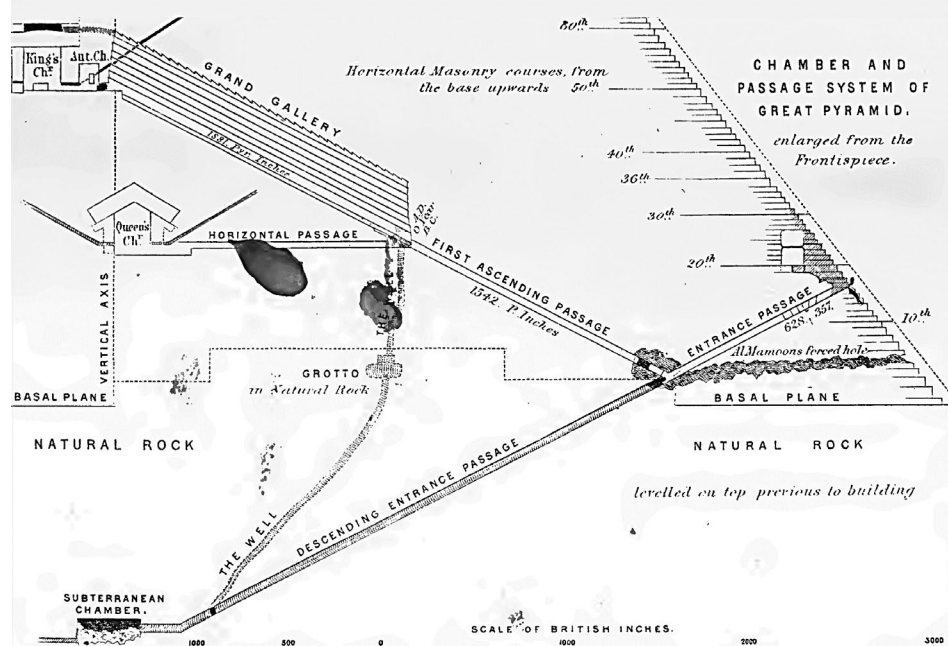
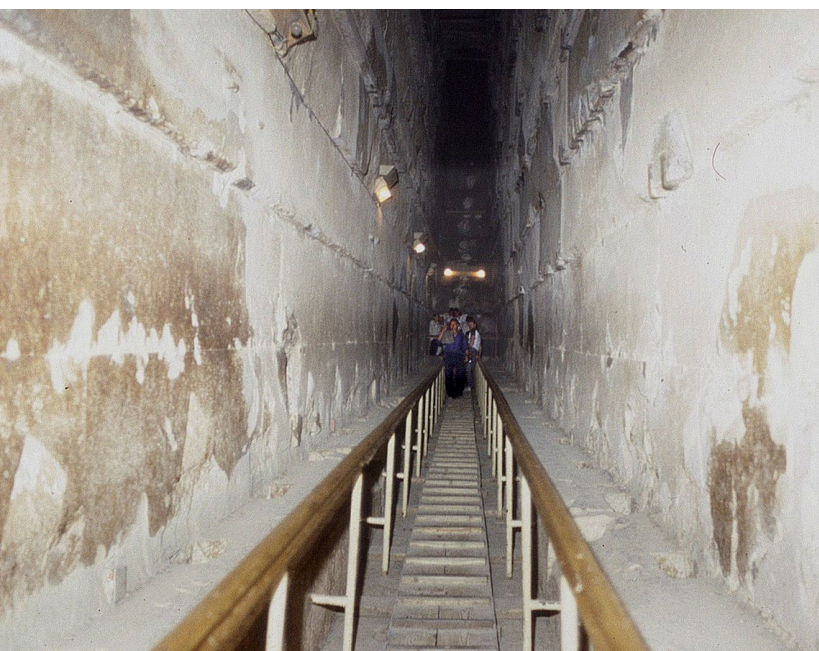
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The ascending passage looked more promising. After climbing for a while, it opened into a much bigger passage called the **Grand Gallery**. Here at last, Ma'mun could finally stretch his legs; for where the other passages were only crawl spaces, the Grand Gallery stood almost thirty feet high.

Once he reached the Grand Gallery, Ma'mun had two choices. First, he could follow a horizontal passage straight ahead to a medium-sized room called the **Queen's Chamber**. Second, he could follow the Grand Gallery up to the biggest room in the Great Pyramid: the **King's Chamber**, which was his best hope for finding Khufu's mummy.

Alas for Ma'mun, neither chamber held anything but disappointment. Their walls were smooth but plain, with no paintings or writings. The King's Chamber did contain a stone sarcophagus, but not one grand enough for a pharaoh. As for Khufu's mummy and all its rich grave goods, those were nowhere to be found—or so it is said.

A view inside the Grand Gallery of the Great Pyramid



Interior diagram from "Our Inheritance in the Great Pyramid" by Charles Piazzi Smyth. The rough passage on the right is the Robbers' Tunnel.

ALTERNATIVE ANALYSES: The problem with the story above is that it may be mostly bunk. As with any historical record, we must check its sources for signs of falsehood; and in this case, the signs are everywhere. The oldest surviving sources come from hundreds of years after Caliph Ma'mun, plenty of time for creative writers to dress up his story.

Once we start questioning sources, we realize that Ma'mun's story looks too good to be true. The idea that he blindly chose the correct face of the pyramid, and then by a stroke of luck found the level where two hidden passages intersected, is rather hard to believe. It is easier to believe that he knew about the intersection



The disappointingly plain sarcophagus inside the King's Chamber

beforehand—maybe because the “hidden” entrance at the top of the descending passage wasn’t hidden by his day. If so, then he didn’t need to tunnel into the Great Pyramid at all.

As long as we’re guessing, we might as well continue guessing. If Ma'mun knew about the intersection, then maybe he also knew about the King's Chamber. Maybe he had explored it already, and even found some of the hidden treasures he sought. If so, then maybe that was why he dug his new passage: so that he could remove his treasures more easily. Perhaps whatever he found was too heavy to force up the descending passage, but manageable with a level passage. He might have dug his level passage not as a way in, but as a way out (Dash, 2011).

Other analysts guess differently. They suggest that grave robbers dug the passage long before Ma'mun's day, and that he only rediscovered it. Guesses like these explain how the passage got its adventuresome name: the **Robbers' Tunnel**.

Mystery upon Mystery

The fate of Khufu's mummy isn't the only mystery surrounding the Great Pyramid. There is also the mystery of the two narrow shafts that lead up and out of the King's Chamber—one headed for the north face, the other for the south face. Here again, different analysts offer different guesses. Some say that the shafts were for carrying Khufu's spirit to and from heaven; while others say they were only for ventilation.

Modern technology has revealed yet another mystery. In 2017, advanced scanning techniques found signs of a hidden room above the Grand Gallery. If that room turns out to be real, and if the Egyptian government ever grants permission to open it, then perhaps some lucky archaeologist will find Khufu's mummy there. Or perhaps he will be as disappointed as Caliph al-Ma'mun.

Nor are the mysteries of the Great Pyramid the only mysteries at Giza. As far as anyone knows, the pyramid of Khufu's son **Khafre** has no hidden secrets—only the usual tomb cut into the bedrock beneath. What the **Pyramid of Khafre** does have is a mysterious sculpture called the **Great Sphinx**.

AWESOME ARTIFACTS: At about 240 feet long and 66 feet high, the Great Sphinx is still one of the biggest artworks in the world. Like a lot of ancient sculptures, it was once painted in bright colors. The desert has long since sand-blasted the paint away, leaving only traces here and there.

Other than those few facts, almost everything about the Great Sphinx is mysterious. The first mystery is, whose face does it represent? Since the sphinx stands due east of the Pyramid of Khafre, some historians guess that the face is Khafre's. But others have noticed that the sphinx's head looks a bit too small for its body. They suggest that it might have looked like someone or something else first, before it was chiseled down to look like Khafre. And of course, the face might not be Khafre's at all. Not one ancient writing links the statue to Khafre, only its location.

A second mystery is, what happened to the sphinx's nose? The usual explanations are so doubtful as to be hardly worth repeating. Some say that playful soldiers used the nose as a target for cannon practice. Others put the story long before cannon, when Muslims like Caliph al-Ma'mun came on the scene. Since Muslims detest idols, it is said that they broke the nose to stop Egyptians from worshiping the idolatrous sphinx. If so, then they may have broken the beard too; for the Great Sphinx once had a beard like Khafre's.

A photo of the Great Sphinx from the late AD 1800s





The three great pyramids at Giza from left to right: the Pyramid of Menkaure, the Pyramid of Khafre and the Pyramid of Khufu (a.k.a. the Great Pyramid of Giza). The smaller buildings in the foreground are called the Queens' Pyramids.

~ The Old Kingdom ~

Breaking Down Egyptian History

136 The story of Egypt is one of the longest from ancient times. It began way back around 3,200 BC, when the first King of All Egypt came on the scene; and it didn't end until 30 BC, when the last Queen of All Egypt committed suicide. Her name was **Cleopatra**, and she is said to have done it by teasing an Egyptian asp until it bit her—as we'll read in Chapter 30.

The best way to study such a long stretch of time is to divide it into shorter stretches. Historians divide the history of ancient Egypt in two main ways: by **dynasty** and by kingdom.

A **dynasty** is a line of rulers who all come from the same family.

More than thirty different dynasties ruled Egypt over the centuries. The **First Dynasty** probably started with Narmer/Menes, who first pulled Lower Egypt and Upper Egypt together under one crown (Chapter 2). The pharaohs with the two biggest pyramids, Khufu and Khafre, came from the **Fourth Dynasty**. Cleopatra came from a later line of Greek-speakers called the **Ptolemaic Dynasty**.

The kingdoms stretch across the dynasties. Like all such long-lived empires, Egypt was strong at times and weak at other times. The times when Egypt was strong are called kingdom periods, while the times of weakness in between are called intermediate periods. Historians speak of three main kingdom periods: the **Old Kingdom**, the **Middle Kingdom** and the **New Kingdom**.

Periods of Egyptian History		
Period Name	Rough Dates	Dynasties
Early Dynastic	3200 – 2700 BC	1 – 2
Old Kingdom	2700 – 2180 BC	3 – 6
First Intermediate	2180 – 2060 BC	7 – 10
Middle Kingdom	2060 – 1800 BC	11 – 12
Second Intermediate	1800 – 1550 BC	13 – 17
New Kingdom	1550 – 1070 BC	18 – 20
Third Intermediate	1070 – 660 BC	21 – 25
Late Period	660 – 330 BC	26 – 31
Greek Period	330 – 30 BC	Ptolemaic



Sculpture of Khafre on display at the Museum of Egyptian Antiquities in Cairo

Judging by the amount of work that went into the great pyramids, the Old Kingdom pharaohs may have been the mightiest of all. Projects that size took tens of thousands of people working at nothing else for many years, all to honor one pharaoh and his queen. If a pharaoh could keep that many people working that hard for that long, and for such a selfish reason, then his power was practically unlimited. Perhaps the average Egyptian believed what his priests told him about the Old Kingdom pharaohs: that they really were gods.

That unlimited power didn't last. As we read in Chapter 2, the third great pyramid at Giza—the one built for Khafre's son **Menkaure**—was the last of the giants. As for Menkaure's son **Shepseskaf**, he got no pyramid at all—only an old-style mastaba. Although later pharaohs returned to pyramid-building, none of theirs was anywhere near the size of the great pyramids. Perhaps their people rebelled at such obvious vanity; or perhaps they simply couldn't afford them anymore.

Early Egyptian Writing

What those later pyramids lacked in size, though, they made up in other ways. We read above that the inside of the Pyramid of Khufu was utterly plain, with no decorations, carvings or writings. Only one dynasty

later, a pharaoh called **Unas** built a pyramid that was anything but plain. Almost every wall inside the **Pyramid of Unas** was covered with **pyramid texts**, all written in a strange script called **hieroglyphics**.

CRITICAL CONCEPTS: A **pyramid text** is a sacred writing on an inner wall of a pyramid.

Hieroglyphs were the characters used to write the ancient Egyptian language.

MISLEADING MONIKERS: The Greek term “hieroglyph” can be a bit misleading. “Hiero-” is Greek for “sacred”; yet the Egyptians used hieroglyphs for all kinds of writing, not just sacred writing. And “glyph” is Greek for “carving,” yet not all hieroglyphs were carved in stone. Starting around 3000 BC, the Egyptians also inked hieroglyphs on scrolls of reedy **papyrus**.

ROLLABLE WRITING MATERIALS: Papyrus

The ancient Egyptians found many uses for the abundant reeds that grew in the Nile Delta. They wove reeds into mats and baskets, braided them into rope, layered them into sandal soles, even fashioned them into boats. Somewhere along the line, they found yet another way to use reeds: as raw material for paper-like papyrus.

To make a sheet of papyrus, the Egyptians first peeled away the outer part of the reed—exposing the sticky fibers inside. Then they sliced the fibers into thin sections and laid them side-by-side to form a sheet. To hold the sheet together, they laid a second layer of sliced fibers at right angles to the first. Then they pressed the layers together, allowing the sticky resin within to meld them into one. After removing the dried sheets from the press, they polished them smooth and rolled them into scrolls for writing.

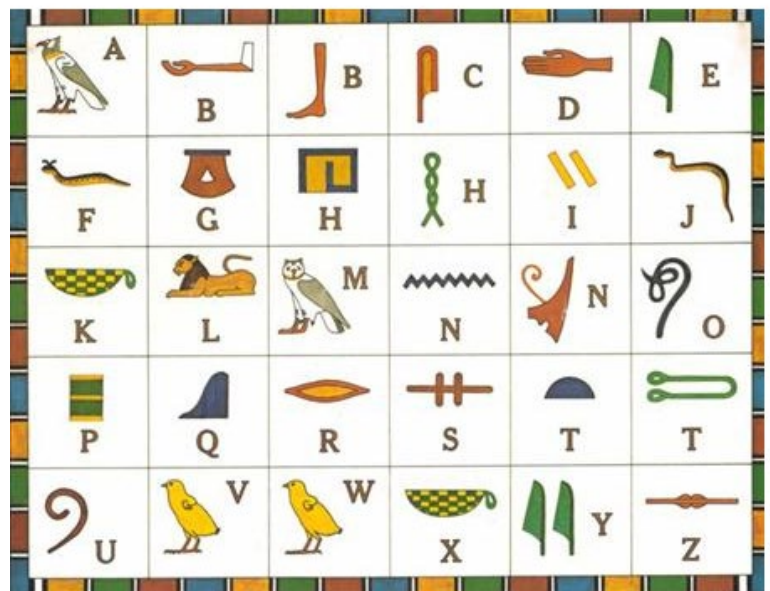
Papyrus-makers peeling reeds in a painting from an ancient tomb



The Egyptians started writing around the same time the Sumerians did, just before 3000 BC. Both writing systems started with the same kinds of characters: simple word pictures called logograms or ideograms. The character for “fish” looked like a fish, the character for “bird” a bird, and so on.

From there, though, the two systems developed in different directions. Since the Sumerians had only clay tablets to write on, they developed wedge-shaped characters that they could form with a reed stylus. Since the Egyptians had papyrus, they developed flowing characters that they could paint with a brush.

VARIANT VERSIONS: The Egyptians also developed different styles of hieroglyphs. The most formal style was usually reserved for tombs, monuments and so on. When writing on papyrus, the Egyptians often switched to a cursive style called **hieratic hieroglyphs**. Later, they developed a second cursive style called **demotic hieroglyphs**.



Examples of hieroglyphic characters that stand for sounds, like the letters of an alphabet

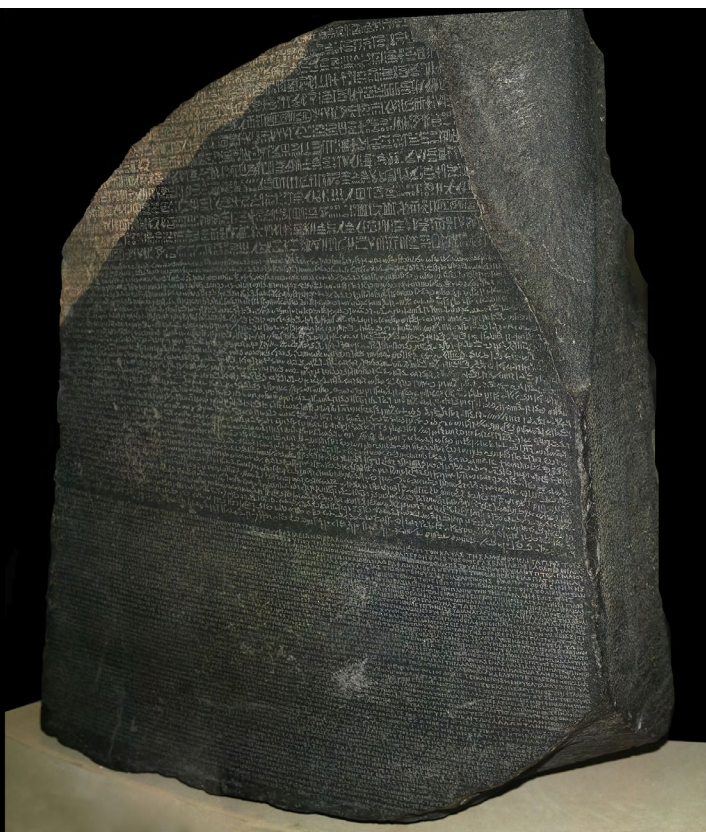
All these different styles caused difficulties in early modern times, when historians got serious about studying ancient Egypt. By now, hieroglyphics had been forgotten for centuries—just as cuneiform had been forgotten. Not a living soul could read more than a few hieroglyphic characters, until some Frenchmen happened upon the **Rosetta Stone**.

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FORTUITOUS FINDS: The Rosetta Stone

It happened around AD 1800, when **Napoleon** ruled Egypt for a year or two. His troops were working on a fort at **Rosetta**, trying to strengthen its walls, when one of them noticed a shaped stone with a lot of writing carved into it. Instead of using the stone to block cannon fire, they hauled it out for a closer look.

The Rosetta Stone on display at the British Museum



When they did, they found that the Rosetta Stone was only part of what had once been a larger stele. The original stele had contained the same message in three different scripts: formal hieroglyphs at the top, demotic hieroglyphs in the middle, and the Greek alphabet at the bottom. Since the Greek alphabet wasn't forgotten, scholars could use the Rosetta Stone to decipher the other two scripts.

The bad news was that the stone was severely damaged. About two-thirds of the formal hieroglyphs were gone now, and parts of the other scripts too.

Deciphering them was going to be an uphill climb, even for an expert linguist like **Jean-Francois Champollion**.

Napoleon Bonaparte was a soldier-politician who built a short-lived First French Empire in the early AD 1800s. The port city of **Rosetta** stood near the northwestern corner of the Nile Delta.

Jean-Francois Champollion was a French linguist from the early 1800s who made great strides in deciphering hieroglyphics.

Part of the problem was preconceptions. Deceived by the prefix “hier-,” most historians assumed that hieroglyphics were only for religious writings—not for everyday ones. The fact that many of the characters looked like animals seemed to back up that assumption. Knowing how the ancient Egyptians linked animals to gods, they figured that animal-based hieroglyphs were probably religious ideograms. If so, then they probably conveyed long-forgotten beliefs that moderns couldn’t hope to decipher.

Champollion figured otherwise. He suspected that at least some hieroglyphs must stand for sounds, like the letters of an alphabet—if he could only figure out which ones. The key to figuring it out turned out to be a unique kind of hieroglyph called a **cartouche**.

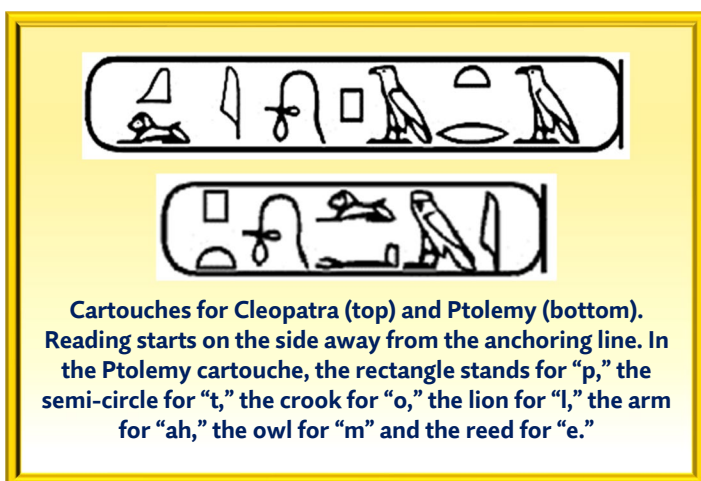


Jean-Francois Champollion (1790 – 1832)

ODDLY-NAMED OVALS: Cartouches

“Cartouche” was a French term, not an Egyptian one. During tours of duty in Egypt, French soldiers noticed that one kind of hieroglyph was particularly common. On monument after monument, they found long ovals with several smaller hieroglyphs inside, anchored by a straight line on one of the

short ends. The shape reminded them of rifle cartridges, which was why they called them *cartouches*—French for cartridges.



Historians had long known what cartouches probably stood for: the names of rulers or other high officials. By comparing the Greek-written names on the Rosetta Stone to the hieroglyphic names inside the cartouches, Champollion was able to decipher two well-known ancient names: Cleopatra and **Ptolemy**.

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With those two names alone, Champollion already had several hieroglyphic “letters” under

Ptolemy the Savior was a successor of Alexander the Great who started the Ptolemaic Dynasty of Egypt (Chapter 25).

his belt. Other clues taught him other letters, helping him sound out more names and words. It turned out that hieroglyphics were a mixed bag like cuneiform—with some characters standing for sounds, some for combinations of sounds, and still others for whole words or ideas. Just as the Behistun Inscription would later unlock the secrets of cuneiform, so the Rosetta Stone unlocked the secrets of hieroglyphics.

AMAZING ANCIENT TEXTS: The Pyramid Texts of Unas

The formal hieroglyphs inside the Pyramid of Unas (above) confirmed what everyone suspected about pharaohs: that they were obsessed with death. Archaeologists had already found physical evidence of the pharaohs’ obsession in mummies, sarcophagi, pyramids and so on. Now they found written evidence in the **Pyramid Texts of Unas**.

One goal of a pyramid text was to reassure a dying pharaoh that things were not as they seemed. Unas was not truly dying, his priests insisted. No, he was only trading his earthly throne for the throne of Osiris. An inscription near his sarcophagus reads: “O Unas, you have not gone dead, you have gone alive to sit on the throne of Osiris. Your scepter is in your hand that you may give orders to the living...” Other inscriptions insist over and over: “He lives! He lives! This Unas lives! He is not dead, this Unas is not dead!

He is not gone down, this Unas is not gone down! He has not been judged, this Unas has not been judged! He judges, this Unas judges!”

A pyramid text was also an instruction manual for a pharaoh’s *ka*, or spirit. Unas’ priests wanted his *ka* to know what to expect in the next world, and what to say to the other gods when he got there. For that was what death meant for an Old Kingdom pharaoh: taking his place among the gods. One of the texts tells Unas, “You were born for Osiris... You have become more glorious than he... more powerful than he.”

A third goal of a pyramid text was invoking the gods. Unas’ priests called on their gods to protect Unas, serve him, and love him as they would a son. Another carving near his sarcophagus reads, “Osiris, seize everyone who hates Unas, who speaks evil against his name... Do not separate yourself from him...” (Brown, n.d.).



One of the many Pyramid Texts of Unas. The oft-repeated cartouche is Unas’ name, in which the right-facing hieroglyphic rabbit reads “oon.”

DOUR DOCUMENTS: Coffin Texts and Books of the Dead

Pharaohs weren’t the only ones who wanted reassurance, instruction and prayer. After Old Kingdom times, lesser Egyptians could have all those things too—provided they could afford them. These later writings came in two main forms: coffin texts and books of the dead.

- **Coffin Texts** were much like pyramid texts, except that they were written inside coffins instead of pyramids. The first coffin texts showed up during the First Intermediate Period, between the Old Kingdom and the Middle Kingdom.
- **Books of the Dead** conveyed the same basic ideas as the other two, only on scrolls of papyrus. These were much later inventions, coming along near the start of New Kingdom times.

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The Rise of the Nomarchs

Governing a country as long and diverse as Egypt was no easy task. The character of the land changed a lot over the course of the Nile, which meant that the concerns of the people changed too. Where Egyptians around the **First Cataract** were concerned about river trade, those around the Nile Delta were more concerned about sea trade. And where First Cataract Egyptians worried about restless **Nubians** to their south, Nile Delta Egyptians worried about restless **Libyans** to their west.

The **First Cataract** of the Nile was the southern border of Egypt in Old Kingdom times (Chapter 2).

Nubia was the next land south of Egypt, and **Libya** the next land west of Egypt.

Part of a coffin text from the Third Intermediate Period





Nomes of Upper Egypt

To make governing a bit easier, the pharaohs divided Egypt into provinces called **nemes**—each with a provincial governor called a **nomarch**. The nomarchs attended to the particular concerns of their nemes, so that no part of the country felt ignored. Although the numbers changed a bit over the centuries, the usual number of nemes was forty-two: twenty-two in Upper Egypt, and twenty in Lower Egypt.

Nomes were nothing new in Fifth Dynasty times. Egypt had probably had them since the First Dynasty, before the Old Kingdom even got started. Their nomarchs were necessary parts of the machine that kept Egypt running.

What was new in Fifth Dynasty times was the amount of power wielded by the nomarchs. Before Unas' day, the nomarchs had always left big decisions to the pharaoh and his officers. Now the nomarchs started making decisions on their own, growing more and more independent of the pharaoh.

The rise of the nomarchs wasn't the only problem the Fifth Dynasty faced. There was also the sad fact that Unas had no son to take his place. When Unas died sonless, probably around 2320 BC, the throne went to his son-in-law: a less-than-royal figure called **Teti**. Since Teti came from a new family, his rise marked the start of a new dynasty: the **Sixth Dynasty**.

The Sixth Dynasty faced even bigger problems than the Fifth. Around this time, Egypt's already-restless neighbors grew a lot more restless. The Nubians pushed up from the south, threatening Egyptians around the First Cataract. The Libyans pushed over from the west, threatening Egyptians around the Nile Delta. 141

But the worst problem the Sixth Dynasty faced was one of its own pharaohs. The fourth pharaoh after Teti, **Pepi II**, was only six years old when he took over—so young that he needed his mother to run his government for him. Some boy kings grew up to be decent rulers, but not this boy king. Pepi II started out weak, and never really grew strong. He also reigned for an extremely long time, about eighty-five years in all. The longer this weak pharaoh lasted, the stronger the nomarchs grew.

The weakness of Pepi II turned out to be the last straw for the Old Kingdom. Soon after the old pharaoh died, his country split to pieces. Instead of one big Egypt, there were now several groups of nemes—each run by a nomarch warlord. The glory days of Old Kingdom Egypt petered out, giving way to the inglorious days of the First Intermediate Period.

~ The Middle Kingdom ~

Heracleopolis versus Thebes

In the long run, two groups of nemes grew stronger than all the rest. One grew up near the southern end of Lower Egypt, around a city the Greeks would later dub **Heracleopolis**. The other grew up near the middle of Upper Egypt, around a city the Greeks would dub **Thebes**.

The contest between Heracleopolis and Thebes was also a contest between dynasties. The **Ninth Dynasty** ruled from Heracleopolis, until the **Tenth Dynasty** took its place. Both dynasties battled the **Eleventh Dynasty**, which ruled from Thebes.

Young Pepi II with his mother





Mentuhotep II wearing the combined crowns of Upper and Lower Egypt

The Eleventh Dynasty was on its sixth king when it finally came out on top. Around 2060 BC, a Theban nomarch called **Mentuhotep II** finally pulled all Egypt together again—just as Narmer/Menes had done at the start. The bad old days of the First Intermediate Period were over. The rise of Mentuhotep II marks the start of the next round of glory days: the Middle Kingdom.

Mentuhotep's big wins came in the middle years of his reign. Since his reign lasted about fifty years, that left plenty of time for building projects. He went from one end of Upper Egypt to the other, setting up temples and monuments to thank the gods for helping him reunite the country.

Like the pharaohs before him, Mentuhotep II cared most about the building where he would be buried. The design of this important building showed how much Egypt had changed since Old Kingdom times. Instead of an extravagant pyramid, Mentuhotep II built a practical **mortuary temple**.

MEANDERING MONUMENTS: The Mortuary Temple of Mentuhotep II

Mentuhotep II was actually two temples in one. The first stood on the green ground near the west bank of the Nile, just across from Thebes. An elevated road connected it to the main temple, which stood in the desert about a half-mile west.

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Montu was an Egyptian war god. The throne name “Mentuhotep” meant “Montu is satisfied.”

Amun-Ra was a blend of the creator god Amun and the sun god Ra.

After Mentuhotep II came two more pharaohs by that name: first his son **Mentuhotep III**, then his grandson **Mentuhotep IV**. The little we know about these two pharaohs comes from inscriptions found in the **Eastern Desert**, which stands between the Nile and the Red Sea. Both sent quarrying expeditions deep into this desert, seeking high-quality stones for their sarcophagi.

A **vizier** was a pharaoh's second-in-command.

The quarry inscription of Mentuhotep IV is particularly interesting. Besides praising the pharaoh himself, the inscription also praises his **vizier**: a take-charge personality called **Amenemhet**. By some strange coincidence, Amenemhet just happens to be the name of the pharaoh after Mentuhotep IV! Based on that and little else, many historians assume that Amenemhet forced off Mentuhotep the throne somehow—maybe by assassinating him.

However it happened, the Eleventh Dynasty ended with Mentuhotep IV. Since Amenemhet I came from a new family, he was the first in a new royal line: the fabulously wealthy **Twelfth Dynasty**.

The Twelfth Dynasty

Wealth-building started with security. Down in Lower Egypt, along the east side of the Nile Delta, Amenemhet I built a line of strong forts to guard against invaders. Known as the **Walls of the Prince**, these forts handled the important job of protecting Amenemhet's breadbasket—the one part of Egypt where crops rarely failed for lack of water.

Amenemhet also worked to secure Upper Egypt against its worst enemy, Nubia. The

The ruin of the desert section of the Mortuary Temple of Mentuhotep II, partly restored in modern times



pharaohs before now had rarely controlled any part of the Nile Valley south of the First Cataract. Now Amenemhet pushed his border some 200 miles up the Nile—as far as **Buhen**, which stood at the Second Cataract.

The next pharaoh, Amenemhet's son **Senusret I**, built a strong fort to secure his father's gains in Nubia. Called the **Fortress of Buhen**, it had thick walls made of mud brick, many strong towers, and a deep ditch outside that made it all but unapproachable.

Besides conquering and fort-building, the Middle Kingdom is also remembered for some of the oldest surviving works of Egyptian literature. One of the oldest tells how the mighty Amenemhet I came to an unexpected end.



The Fortress of Buhen seen from the ditch outside

PESSIMISTIC POEMS: "The Instructions of Amenemhet"

"The Instructions of Amenemhet" is a short poem written in the voice of old Amenemhet I himself, full of fatherly advice for his son Senusret I. Sadly, the first bit of advice is to avoid all companionship. "Trust none as a brother," Amenemhet warns his son; "Make no friend, create no intimates—it is worthless." If Senusret trusts anyone at all, his father says, then he may suffer the same fate as his father: being assassinated by a trusted servant.

It came with no warning. "It was after the meal, night had fallen," the old pharaoh tells his son, when he was taking "an hour of rest." Just when "my heart began to follow sleep, suddenly weapons... were turned against me." The villain who turned on him was his closest bodyguard: "the very eater of my bread... the one to whom I gave my arms." Not even a great fighter like Amenemhet could survive such a despicable sneak attack; for "there is no night champion, no-one who can fight alone."

What makes this betrayal even more unbearable is that Amenemhet has done nothing to deserve it. What pharaoh could have done more for his people, Amenemhet asks? "I gave to the destitute and raised up the orphan; I promoted the man with nothing as much as the man of means... None hungered in my years, none thirsted then. Men rested through what I had done, and told tales of me. All I had decreed was in its correct place" (Grajetzki, n.d.).

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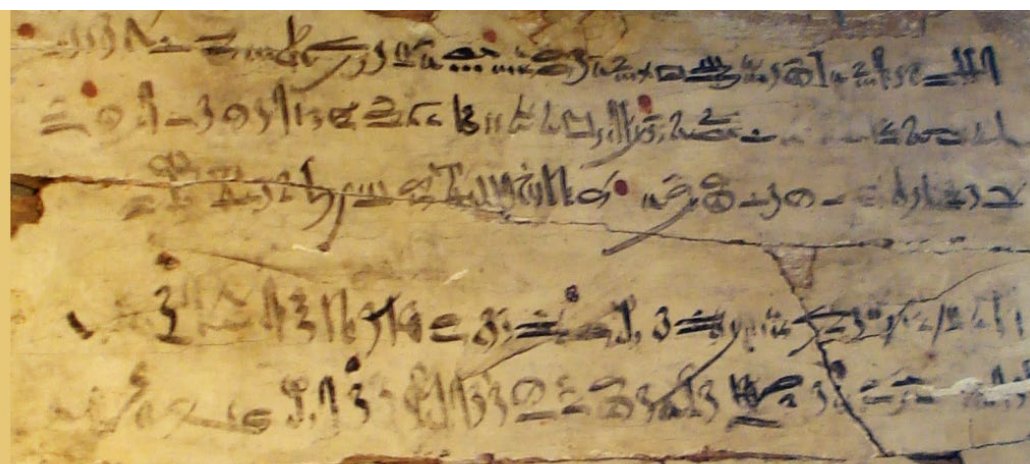
POLITICAL POEMS: "The Tale of Sinuhe"

Our next work of literature, "The Tale of Sinuhe," is more obviously political than the last. **Sinuhe** is a probably-fictional character who starts out as a close aide to Amenemhet I. He is away from the palace on a mission when he hears that the dear old pharaoh has been assassinated. The news makes Sinuhe

reluctant to return to the palace, for two reasons: because he is afraid of being killed in the palace coup, and because he has "no mind to live after" his master. Instead of going home, he runs to far-off Syria.

Even this far from Egypt, mouths are overflowing with praise for the pharaohs. Upon hearing of Amenemhet's death, one of Sinuhe's Syrian

Part of "The Instructions of Amenemhet" written in hieratic hieroglyphs





companions wants to know: “How shall yon land [Egypt] fare without him, the beneficent god, the fear of whom was throughout the lands...?” The unbiased reader can’t help but wonder if the pharaoh’s rivals in Syria really took such a positive view of him.

Sinuhe’s answer is just as positive. He says that Egypt has nothing to fear; for the next pharaoh, Senusret I, is as wonderful as his father. “A god is he without a peer,” Sinuhe says of Senusret I; “none other surpasses him. A master of prudence is he, excellent in counsel, efficacious in decrees” (Gardiner, 1916). The message couldn’t have been clearer if Senusret I had written “The

Tale of Sinuhe” himself. Entertaining though the tale may have been, it was also blatant propaganda custom-written to promote pharaoh worship.

The Golden Age of the Twelfth Dynasty

The next great pharaoh of the Twelfth Dynasty, **Senusret II**, is remembered for something that still shows in modern satellite photos. South of the green Nile Delta, everything outside the Nile Valley looks like dry sand—with one exception. West of the river, not far from Cairo, stands a green land called the **Faiyum Oasis**. The water that keeps the Faiyum green comes not from underground springs, but from a miles-long canal that connects it to the Nile. That canal is called the **Bahr Yussef**, and it was probably dug on orders from Senusret II.

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The Bahr Yussef was just one of many big projects built by Senusret II. Thanks to all his hard work, the next two pharaohs were some of the richest ever. The reigns of **Senusret III** and **Amenemhet III** were a golden age for Egypt, a time of great prosperity and peace.

The golden age of the Twelfth Dynasty was also a time of expansion. Where earlier pharaohs stopped at the Second Cataract, Senusret III pushed his border up to the Third Cataract. He also conquered to his northeast, pushing his border into Canaan. For the first time ever, Egypt was more than just a big kingdom. With foreign lands coming under the pharaohs’ sway on all sides, it was starting to look more like an empire.

INEVITABLE ENDINGS: The end of the Twelfth Dynasty was a bit like the end of the Fifth. Like Unas before him, Amenemhet III left no son to take his place. Stalling for time, the dynasty chose an older relative to install as Pharaoh **Amenemhet IV**. When that one died too, the only relative left alive was a pharaoh’s daughter called **Sobekneferu**.

What happened next isn’t quite clear. Perhaps male-chauvinist Egypt rebelled against its female pharaoh, or perhaps Sobekneferu simply died without leaving a son. However it happened, the Twelfth Dynasty was finished; and so were the glory days of the Middle Kingdom. The collapse of the Twelfth Dynasty helped bring on Egypt’s next period of weakness: the Second Intermediate Period.

Pharaohs of the Twelfth Dynasty

Amenemhet I	1991 – 1962 BC*
Senusret I	1971 – 1928 BC
Amenemhet II	1929 – 1895 BC
Senusret II	1897 – 1878 BC
Senusret III	1878 – 1843 BC
Amenemhet III	1842 – 1797 BC
Amenemhet IV	1798 – 1790 BC
Sobekneferu	1789 – 1786 BC

* All dates are approximate

❧ BIBLICAL HISTORY ❧

~ The Twelve Sons of Jacob ~

The rest of this chapter takes us back to the Jewish patriarchs of Genesis. In Chapter 6, we read how Father Jacob married two daughters of his Uncle Laban: Leah whom he didn't want, and Rachel whom he did want. With Leah and Rachel came their two handmaids, Zilpah and Bilhah. Between the four of them, they gave Jacob the twelve sons who would become the Twelve Tribes of Israel.

Jacob's wives also gave him at least one daughter: Dinah, born to the unloved Leah. Genesis 34 tells how young Dinah was attacked by a foreigner, and what Jacob's sons did about it.

The Dinah Incident

The **Hivites** are one of several Canaanite peoples listed in Genesis 10:15-20, which gives the genealogy of Noah's son Ham.

The story starts back in Canaan, where Jacob has just returned after twenty years in Mesopotamia. In Genesis 33:19, we find Jacob buying a plot of land for an altar. His new land lies just outside Shechem, where Father Abraham built his first altar in Canaan.

The foreigner who attacks Dinah is also called **Shechem**. Genesis 34:2 says of

him, "And when Shechem the son of Hamor the **Hivite**, prince of the country, saw [Dinah], he took her and lay with her, and violated her." In other words, Shechem rapes Dinah.

Some rapists feel contempt for their victims, but not this one. Although Shechem started out wrong, he thinks he can make everything right by marrying Dinah. When he and Hamor approach Jacob and sons to arrange the marriage, they tell them to name their price. No dowry will be too much to ask, if they will only give Dinah to Shechem as a bride.

Besides the marriage union, Hamor also proposes a broader union. He wants the Hivites and the Jews to become one people, he says—sharing the land, their daughters and everything else.

DEADLY DECEPTIONS: A union between Jews and Hivites is impossible, as the sons of the Abrahamic Covenant are forbidden to marry Canaanites. If the sons of Jacob weren't furious over the rape of their sister, then they might explain that to Hamor. Because they are furious, they pretend to like the idea.

There is just one small problem, the brothers say: the fact that the Hivites aren't circumcised. To give their sister to one who is uncircumcised would be a "**reproach**" to them, they explain in 34:14. If the Hivites will agree to be circumcised, the brothers say, then the Jews will gladly become one people with them. If not, then the Jews will take Dinah and leave.

What happens next shows what an important Hivite Shechem is. At the request of their prince, all Hivite men undergo miserable circumcisions. The pain is so excruciating that none of them will be fit to work for several days.

Only then do we learn the brothers' real reason for bringing up circumcision. The Hivites are lying around three days later, still sore from being circumcised—when out of nowhere, Jacob's sons Simeon and Levi attack them. The Hivites are so hobbled by pain that they can't fight back. The brothers kill every adult male Hivite they can catch, all for the crime of one Hivite leader. With the Hivite men out of the way, the rest of the brothers take all the Hivite women and children prisoner. They also take their livestock, their crops, their household goods, and everything else they own.



"The Seduction of Dinah"
by James Tissot



“Joseph’s Dreams”

Father Jacob’s reaction comes as a bit of a surprise. He says nothing about his sons’ brutality to the Hivites on the one hand, or about Shechem’s brutality to Dinah on the other. His only concern is for his family’s safety. “You have troubled me,” Jacob complains to the brothers in 34:30, “by making me obnoxious... among the Canaanites... and since I am few in number, they will gather themselves together against me and kill me. I shall be destroyed, my household and I.”

Simeon and Levi complain right back, feeling that their father should be more upset about the rape of Dinah. When Jacob calls them on the carpet for murdering the Hivites, they answer him in 34:31: “Should [Shechem be allowed to] treat our sister like a harlot?”

REVEALING REACTIONS: The argument between Jacob, Simeon and Levi reminds us of a rift that started back in Genesis 29, where Laban tricked Jacob into marrying Leah. The reason Simeon and Levi care so much about Dinah is that she was born to Leah, just as they were. Leah and her children are like a sub-family within Jacob’s family, separate from all the other mothers and their sons.

Perhaps that same rift explains why Jacob seems so unconcerned about Dinah. The fact that Jacob loves Leah less means that he also loves Leah’s children less. His best love is reserved for the two sons of his beloved Rachel, who are also the two youngest: **Joseph** and **Benjamin**.

GIANTS OF THE FAITH: Joseph

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The story of Joseph is the longest in the whole book of Genesis, covering fourteen chapters from 37 – 50. It is also the most heavily structured story, packed with parallels and chiasms within chiasms. The amount of attention lavished on Joseph marks him as one of the key figures of Judaism, as important as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Joseph Dreams of Greatness

Young Joseph is in trouble with his older brothers from the moment we meet him. In Genesis 37:2, we find a seventeen-year-old Joseph bringing Jacob “a bad report” about the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah. Now those four sons resent him too, just as the six sons of Leah resent him for being their father’s favorite.

The brothers’ resentment only grows when Jacob honors his favorite son with a unique gift: a beautiful coat “of many colors.” The sight of the coat makes the older brothers so jealous that they can no longer “speak peaceably to” Joseph (37:3-4).

The brothers grow even more jealous starting in 37:5, where Joseph tells them about a remarkable dream he has had. The dream starts with all of them working together in a field, cutting wheat and tying it into sheaves. “Then behold,” Joseph says, “my sheaf arose and also stood upright; and indeed your sheaves stood all around and bowed down to my sheaf.” The brothers don’t need Joseph to tell them what the dream means. If he is seeing the future, then it means that he will rule them all someday.

The brothers are still fuming over the first dream when Joseph has a second one that is even worse. Instead of sheaves this time, Joseph sees “the sun, the moon, and the eleven stars” bowing low to him (37:9). The image is so shocking that even Jacob isn’t sure what to make of it. If the eleven stars are Joseph’s brothers, then the sun and moon are probably his father and mother. For what possible reason would a patriarch ever bow before his son?

“Joseph’s Dream”



Both dreams are still on the brothers' minds sometime later, when Jacob sends Joseph to check on them. They are tending their livestock at a place called **Dothan**, about a day's walk from Shechem, when they recognize Joseph in the distance—probably by his colorful coat. The very sight of him kindles a murderous rage in the brothers. Several of them plan to kill Joseph, dump his body in "some pit," and then tell Jacob that he was eaten by a "wild beast" (37:20). They think it a fitting comeuppance that this head-in-the-clouds dreamer should wind up discarded in a pit.

The story of Joseph might end right there, if not for his oldest brother: **Reuben**, son of Leah. Reuben says that it would be a mistake to shed Joseph's blood, to which the others grudgingly agree. He convinces them to abandon Joseph in a dry pit instead, hoping to circle back later and rescue him.

ILLUMINATING UPDATES: This positive move from Reuben comes as another surprise. The last time we saw Reuben was in 35:22, where he infuriated Jacob by sleeping with Jacob's wife Bilhah. Maybe that explains why Reuben tries to save Joseph: because he hopes to get back in his father's good graces. Or maybe it is because Reuben is the oldest son, and the oldest often bears most of the blame.



"Joseph is Sold by His Brothers"
by Gustave Dore

Whatever Reuben's reasons, his plan only half works. He has gone off somewhere, and the other brothers are sitting down to eat, when some **Ishmaelite** traders happen by. The sight of them gives the fourth brother in line, Leah's son **Judah**, an idea. Judah knows that Ishmaelites don't just trade the "spices, balm and myrrh" mentioned in 37:25. He has heard that they also trade slaves. He says that instead of killing Joseph, the brothers should make some money off him—by selling him into slavery.

The **Ishmaelites** are the descendants of Abraham's son Ishmael.

True to their reputation, the Ishmaelites are happy to buy Joseph. They settle on a price of twenty shekels of silver, or two shekels per older brother. The Ishmaelites hand over the silver; and in exchange, the brothers hand over their own flesh and blood.

After that, all that remains is to break the bad news to Jacob. The brothers' plan for deceiving their father starts with the symbol of their jealousy, that wonderful coat of Joseph's—which they now pretend not to recognize. After dipping the coat in the blood of a young goat, they present it to Jacob with a casual-seeming question: "We have found this [bloody coat]. Do you know whether it is your son's tunic or not?" (37:32). Jacob's heart shatters, believing that his favorite has been torn to pieces.

"Joseph's Bloody Coat Brought to Jacob" by Diego Velazquez



INTERESTING IDEAS: The coat in this scene is an ironic reminder of the blessing scene from Genesis 27. Just as Jacob used Esau's clothes to deceive Isaac then, so the brothers use Joseph's clothes to deceive Jacob now.

By this time, poor Joseph is well on his way to the Ishmaelites' destination: Egypt. Just where in Egypt Joseph lands, the Bible doesn't say. He may land in or near the capital; for the Egyptian who buys him, **Potiphar**, is said to be "an officer of Pharaoh and captain of the guard" (37:36).

The Tamar Incident

While Joseph is busy learning to speak Egyptian, Genesis takes a side trip into the affairs of his older brother Judah. Starting in 38:1, we find Judah leaving his brothers' company for a while. Oddly enough for a son of the covenant, he seems to prefer the company of Canaanites. He is especially fond of his unnamed Canaanite wife, who quickly gives him three named sons: **Er**, **Onan** and **Shelah**.

As soon as Er grows old enough, Judah finds a wife for him. We read nothing of the young woman's origins, only that her name is **Tamar**. The young couple are hardly married when Tamar becomes a widow. Er has done something "wicked in the sight of the Lord," causing the Lord to kill him.

COMMEMORATIVE CODES: Levirate Marriage

To understand what happens next, we must first understand an interesting aspect of Jewish marriage law. Although the Law of Moses has yet to be written, good Jews are already living by a law that will be written in Deuteronomy 25:5-10: the **Law of Levirate Marriage**. It says that "if two brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son," then the living brother should give the dead brother's widow a son. That son will belong to the dead brother, so "that his name may not be blotted out of Israel."

The idea of levirate marriage reminds us how critically important children were to the ancient Jews. God's promise of many descendants was the very cornerstone of the Abrahamic Covenant. To receive God's gift of children was to take one's place in that covenant. All good Jews wanted as many children as they could get—especially the women, who found life without children practically meaningless.

Judah clearly understands the importance of children; for when Er dies sonless, Judah orders his brother Onan to make a levirate marriage with Tamar. But Onan drags his feet, knowing that his first son with Tamar will belong to his dead brother Er.

INTERESTING IDEAS: Onan's foot-dragging makes good sense economically. Since Er was the oldest brother, his son would inherit a double share of Judah's estate. As for Onan, he would inherit only a single share—even though he would be the boy's biological father.

Onan's economic calculations lead him into a deadly trap. Although he does marry Tamar, he also makes sure that Tamar doesn't have a child. The Lord is so angry at Onan's wickedness that He kills him as He did Er.

If Judah were sticking to the law, then he would now order his third son Shelah to make a levirate marriage with Tamar. But Judah is afraid to, lest Shelah suffer the same fate as his brothers. Instead of giving the order, he sends Tamar back to her family—saying that Shelah is too young to marry, and that she must live as a grieving widow until the boy grows up. Tamar obeys, counting on Judah to stay true to his word.

Sometime later, though, Tamar gives up on Judah. Shelah is all grown up now, yet his father still hasn't ordered him to marry her. Fearing that Judah may never change his mind, she takes matters into her own hands.

Tamar waits for the yearly sheep-shearing to make her move. Sheep-shearing is a time for celebration, which means that Judah is probably drinking. That probably explains why he doesn't recognize the veiled woman whom he meets on his way to the shearing one day. He thinks that she is only a common harlot, when she is really his former daughter-in-law Tamar.

"Judah and Tamar"





"Judah and Tamar"

The price of this particular harlot is a young goat from Judah's flock, which he promises to send as soon as he can. Until he does, the harlot wants some collateral. She says that she will only sleep with him if he first hands over his "signet and cord, and... staff" (38:18). She is asking quite a lot; for the signet, cord and staff are all the identifying signs that Judah uses for business. Nevertheless, he doesn't hesitate to hand them over.

Afterward, Judah sends a friend to trade the promised goat for his signet, cord and staff. But when the friend asks around, the harlot is nowhere to be found. Judah decides to let the whole embarrassing matter drop, "lest we be shamed" (38:23).

About three months later, Judah hears a bad report about Tamar. It seems that his daughter-in-law has been playing the harlot, and has gotten herself pregnant—when she is supposed to have been grieving Judah's dead sons. The fact that Judah chases harlots himself doesn't stop him from condemning Tamar for harlotry. He sounds righteously indignant as he cries, "Bring her out and let her be burned!"

Only then does Tamar spring her trap. On her way out to be burned, she sends this message to Judah: "By the man to whom these belong, I am with child... Please determine whose these are—the signet and cord, and staff" (38:25). All talk of burning ceases as Judah realizes what he has done. Without knowing it, he too has committed a crime worthy of death: sleeping with his own daughter-in-law!

Tamar's trap is the perfect medicine for Judah's smug attitude. He knows right away why she deceived him: because he didn't keep his promise about Shelah, and she had no other way to make descendants for Abraham. Instead of condemning Tamar like before, Judah admits that "She has been more righteous than I" (38:26).

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INTRIGUING OUTCOMES: The story of Tamar might not appear in the Book of Genesis if not for a son she has with Judah; for this son is rather important. Like Isaac before him, Judah has fathered twin sons: an older called **Zerah**, and a younger called **Perez**. In Ruth 4, we will read that Perez is the ancestor of Ruth's husband **Boaz**. Boaz will beget **Obed**, who will beget **Jesse**, who will beget the greatest King of Israel: **David**. Since Jesus Christ will come from the line of David, Perez is also an ancestor of Christ.

But Perez isn't the only reason for Tamar's appearance. She is also here to help us understand a remarkable change in Judah. Before now, we have seen little to admire about this particular son of Jacob. We have watched Judah suggest selling his own brother into slavery, go through with it, and then lie to his father about it. We have also watched him chase a harlot, and then hypocritically demand that Tamar be burned for harlotry. Now at the end of Tamar's story, we see Judah humbly confessing his sin. That explains why Judah is so much more admirable the next time we see him, near the end of Joseph's story.

Joseph in Potiphar's House

For now, though, Joseph is still suffering the consequences of the old Judah. Instead of living it up as his father's favorite, Joseph is a poor slave in Egypt—wondering if he will ever see his family again. Even so, he keeps a positive attitude. By Genesis 39:2, we are already reading that Joseph is a "successful man"—even though he is still a slave.

The reason for Joseph's success appears in that same verse: "The Lord was with [him]." Just as God promised Abraham, the Jews are a blessing to all families of the Earth. God pours out so many blessings on faithful Jews that they overflow onto the Gentiles around them.

The Gentile who benefits most from Joseph's blessings is his new owner, Potiphar. To Potiphar's eyes, it looks like everything his slave touches turns to gold. He trusts Joseph so completely that he puts him in charge of everything he owns, never bothering to check on him.



“Joseph Interprets Dreams while in Prison” by James Tissot

The trouble is that Potiphar’s wife also thinks highly of Joseph. Starting in 39:7, we find her cozying up to the handsome young man—asking him to sleep with her. Joseph tries to put her off, saying that both God and his master deserve better from him. But Potiphar’s wife keeps asking, hoping to tempt Joseph into changing his mind.

Things finally get out of hand. The other male servants are all outdoors one day, leaving Joseph alone with Potiphar’s wife, when she tries to tempt him one more time. This time she grips his garment so tightly that he must leave it in her hand to get away from her.

The lingering garment gives Potiphar’s wife an idea. In her anger at being snubbed, she decides to reverse the story—saying that it was Joseph who propositioned her, and she who resisted. Naturally, Potiphar is furious. At a false word from his wife, Potiphar goes from trusting Joseph to having him thrown in jail.

Joseph in the Jailkeeper’s House

This could be the end for Joseph; but instead, it is another beginning. Just as he once rose to the top as a slave, so now he rises to the top as a jailbird. The jailkeeper soon trusts Joseph so completely that he makes him manager of his whole jail. Genesis 39 ends with a reminder of God’s faithfulness to Joseph: “whatever he did, the Lord made it prosper.”

150 We also see signs that the Lord is arranging Joseph’s circumstances, or at least taking advantage of them. It turns out that the jail Joseph manages is the same jail where the pharaoh keeps his prisoners. If he had never gone to jail, then he never would have met two servants of the pharaoh: one a baker, the other a butler.

What happens next reminds us of a side of Joseph that we haven’t seen for a while: his special talent with dreams. The difference is that the dreams don’t come to Joseph this time. They come instead to the baker and the butler, who have no idea what they mean. Joseph offers to help, saying: “Do not interpretations belong to God?”

INTERESTING IDEAS: Joseph’s mention of God is remarkable for someone in his situation. Despite all the injustice he has suffered, he still gives God credit for his talent with dreams—instead of claiming credit himself. This is only the second time we hear Joseph speak openly of God, after he first spoke of Him to Potiphar’s wife.

INVERSE INTERPRETATIONS: The butler’s dream starts with a grapevine of three branches, all full of grapes. He sees himself squeezing the grapes into the pharaoh’s cup and handing it over for him to drink. Joseph explains what all this means: that in three days, the butler will be back at his old job.

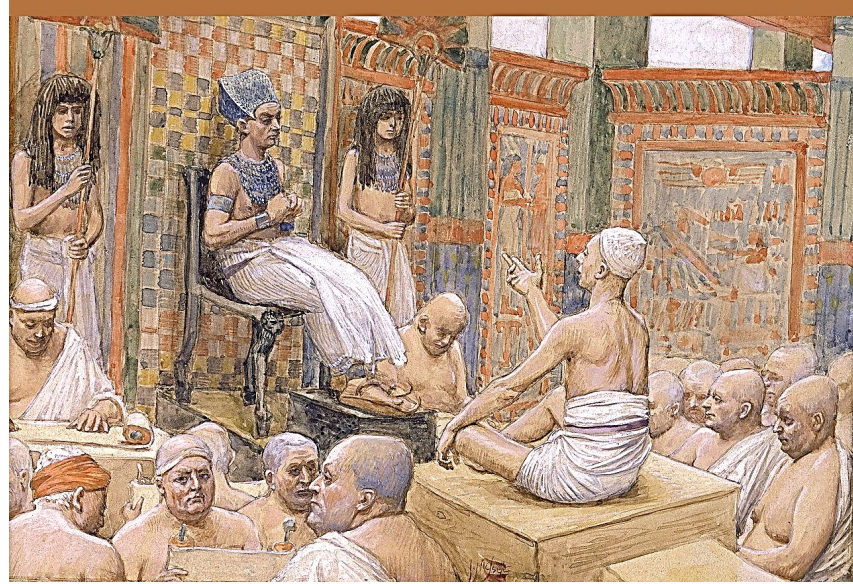
The baker’s dream is more ominous. He sees himself carrying three baskets of baked goods on his head, and birds eating from the baskets. Joseph gives the baker the bad news: that in three days, the pharaoh will put the baker to death.

“Joseph Interprets the Prisoners’ Dreams”



Both stories play out just as Joseph predicts—with the butler back at his old job, and the baker hanged to death. Joseph has asked the butler to put in a kind word with the pharaoh, hoping to be set free; but alas, the butler forgets.

Poor Joseph endures two more years in jail before the butler finally remembers him. What jogs his memory is a pair of dreams that trouble the pharaoh's sleep, just as the butler's dream once troubled his. Now for the third time in his life, Joseph will have two strange dreams to interpret.



"Joseph Interprets Pharaoh's Dream" by James Tissot

Joseph in Pharaoh's House

Both of the pharaoh's dreams follow the same pattern. In dream one, he sees seven fat cows emerge from the Nile and start feeding in a meadow. Then come seven thin cows, which proceed to eat the fat cows—and yet stay thin. In dream two, the pharaoh sees seven plump heads of grain growing on one stalk. Then come seven thin heads that are "blighted by the east wind" (41:6). The thin heads swallow the plump heads, and yet stay thin.

At the butler's urging, the pharaoh summons Joseph from jail and asks him what he thinks—saying, "I have heard it said of you that you can understand a dream, to interpret it" (41:15). Before Joseph answers, he makes it perfectly clear Who deserves the credit. The power to interpret dreams comes only from God, as Joseph says in 41:16: "It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh an answer of peace."

INTERESTING IDEAS: Joseph's bold statement about God is even more meaningful when we remember the company in which he makes it. The pharaoh has already asked "all the magicians of Egypt and all its wise men" to interpret his dream, and they have all failed (41:8). When Joseph succeeds where they failed, it will prove that the one true God is far mightier than their false gods. This new statement of faith from Joseph is also much bolder than the ones before, indicating that he now recognizes God's hand in his life.

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The two dreams are in fact one, Joseph says. God has sent both for the same reason, to tell pharaoh "what He is about to do" (41:25). The fact that God sends two dreams means that the future is set, and that

what Joseph predicts will soon come to pass.

The seven fat cows and the seven healthy heads of grain stand for the same thing, Joseph says: seven good years. For the next seven years, Egyptians will raise plenty of fat cattle and grain. But then will come seven hard years when the cattle and grain are thin. The famine will be so bad that Egyptians will forget all about the good years.

The good news is that by sending the dreams, God is giving the pharaoh time to prepare. The way to prepare, Joseph says, is to choose some "discerning and wise man, and set him over the land of Egypt" (41:33). For the next seven years, that man should collect one-fifth of all food raised in Egypt. He should store food in every city, so that "the land may not perish" when the bad years of famine come (41:36).

"Joseph Interprets Pharaoh's Dream" by Gustave Dore





"Joseph Receiving Pharaoh's Ring" by Giovanni Tieolo

The pharaoh is so impressed that when the time comes to choose a "wise man," he can think of no one better than Joseph himself. Strangely for an Egyptian, the pharaoh is also impressed with Joseph's God. He makes no mention of Egypt's gods as he gushes to his servants, "Can we find such a one as this, a man in whom is the Spirit of God?" (41:38).

OUTLANDISH OUTCOMES: The outcome of Joseph's story is something that only almighty God could arrange. After coming to Egypt as a slave, and

then spending years in an Egyptian jail, Joseph becomes the highest officer in the Egyptian government: vizier to the pharaoh. Only the pharaoh himself has more power, and even he defers to Joseph. Like Potiphar and the jailkeeper before him, the pharaoh trusts Joseph so completely that he leaves everything in his hands. In this case, "everything" means all the affairs of the greatest country in the world.

GENEROUS GIFTS: To prove that he means what he says, the pharaoh blesses Joseph with three special gifts. First, he gives Joseph his "signet ring"—which contains the special seal used to sign official documents. Second, he gives Joseph robes of "fine linen"—like the special robes worn by priests. Third, he gives Joseph a "gold chain" for his neck—like the special chains worn by royals (41:42). With these rich gifts, Joseph can stand on an equal footing with any Egyptian—whether a royal, a priest, or even the pharaoh himself.

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The pharaoh also gives Joseph an Egyptian wife, who soon gives him two sons. The names of Joseph's two sons show how he feels about all that has happened to him. He calls his firstborn **Manasseh**, saying in 41:51: "For God has made me forget all my toil and all my father's house." He calls his second-born **Ephraim**, saying in 41:52: "For God has caused me to be fruitful in the land of my affliction."

Meanwhile, Joseph puts his plan for saving Egypt into action. He travels up and down the whole country, collecting grain and storing it for the hard years ahead. He stores so much that he finally stops counting, calling the amount "immeasurable" (41:49). Egypt will be well prepared when the bad years come, thanks to all Joseph's hard work.

Manasseh is Hebrew for "making forget."

Ephraim sounds like the Hebrew for "be fruitful."

CONSPICUOUS COUNTS: The Number Three in the Story of Joseph

The number three appears so often in Joseph's story that it is hard to miss. Among other examples to come, we notice all these so far:

- Three garments for Joseph: the coat of many colors, the garment torn off by Potiphar's wife, and the linen robes given him by the pharaoh
- Three sets of two dreams each: one to Joseph, one to the baker and butler, and one to the pharaoh
- Three branches of grapes in the butler's dream
- Three baskets of baked goods in the baker's dream
- Three gifts for Joseph from the pharaoh: the signet ring, the linen robes and the gold chain

"Joseph Reorganizes Egypt"



- Three houses for Joseph in Egypt: Potiphar's house, the jailhouse and the pharaoh's house. Joseph winds up in charge of all three—thanks to God, Who is present with Joseph in all three.

Identifying Joseph's Pharaoh

We end this chapter by asking a question for which no historian has a sure answer: Just which pharaoh did Joseph serve? He must have been one of the mighty pharaohs; for he seems to have ruled all Egypt, not just part of it. That probably places him in one of three historical periods: the Old Kingdom, the Middle Kingdom or the New Kingdom. The question is, which kingdom was it—and which was Joseph's pharaoh?

The problem of identifying pharaohs in the Bible is a tricky one. Although the Jews dealt with many pharaohs over the centuries, the Bible names only a few of them. Those few come much later, after Israel establishes a kingdom in the Promised Land. Before then, the Bible just calls them all "pharaoh." Since we cannot go by names, we must try to go by chronology.

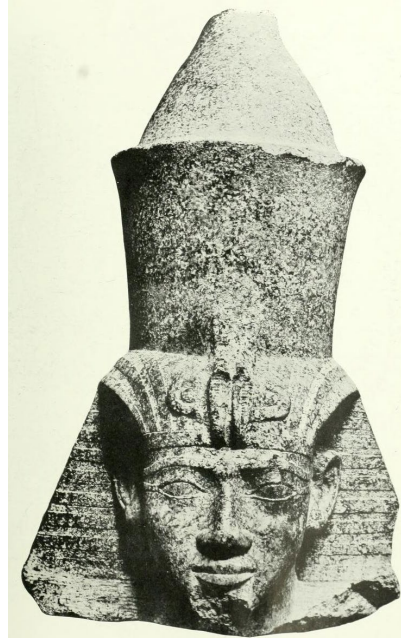
CONTESTED CHRONOLOGIES: The simplest Biblical chronology is the one that takes the Bible most literally. It starts with I Kings 6:1, which says that 480 years elapsed between two key events: the Jews' Exodus from Egypt, and the foundation of the first Temple of God in Jerusalem. The Temple-building started "In the fourth year of Solomon's reign over Israel," which **Edwin Thiele** dated to 966 BC. Adding 480 to 966 gives the year of the Biblical Exodus: 1446 BC. Counting backward and forward from there yields the dates found in the Biblical timeline at the beginning of this book.

Dr. **Edwin Thiele** authored *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, an influential work that helps establish dates for the kings of Israel and Judah.

Now for the question of Joseph's pharaoh. Turning over to Exodus 12:40, we find that "the sojourn of the children of Israel who lived in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years." Adding 430 to 1446 brings us to 1876, which would be the year when Joseph brought his family to Egypt—as we'll read in Chapter 8. Since Joseph had lived in Egypt for about twenty years by then, he would have arrived there around 1896 BC.

Looking back at our chart of Middle Kingdom pharaohs (above), we find that the reign of Pharaoh Senusret II started around that time. If both our Biblical chronology and our chart are correct—and both are rather big "ifs"—then the pharaoh Joseph served was **Senusret II**.

The chronologies aren't the only clues that point to Senusret II. There is also that long canal we covered above: the Bahr Yussef, which connects the Faiyum Oasis to the Nile River. It so happens that "Yussef" is the Arabic version of "Joseph." Could it be that the Bahr Yussef was named for the Biblical Joseph, who supervised its digging in the long-ago days of Pharaoh Senusret II?



Head of Senusret II

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FASCINATING FACTS about River Deltas

- River deltas form where fast-flowing rivers drain into slow-moving oceans, seas or lakes. As the flow slows near the river's mouth, the silt that was carried along with the water settles to the bottom. The buildup of silt obstructs the flow, causing the river to branch out in search of new paths. The longer this goes on, the wider the delta spreads.
- Since fast-flowing rivers carry nutrients as well as silt, delta soil is usually rich and fertile.
- The world's largest delta is the **Ganges Delta**, which forms where the Ganges River flows into the Bay of Bengal. Other large deltas include the **Niger Delta** in Nigeria; the **Orinoco Delta** in Venezuela; the **Indus Delta** in Pakistan; the **Mekong Delta** in Vietnam; the **Volga Delta** in Russia; and the **Mississippi Delta** in the United States.

