



BSFL: Genesis 45:3-11; 50:15-21

Joseph and His Brothers



By Roberta Jones

ALTHOUGH JOSEPH WAS born about 3,900 years ago,¹ human emotions remain the same. Joseph's relatives often chose hatred and deceit. Guilt plagued his brothers. Favoritism, fear, and jealousy appeared. Conflict in Joseph's life sent him to a Canaanite pit, an Ishmaelite spice caravan, an Egyptian prison, and to the glories of Egypt. God guided him through every adventure.

Joseph's Family

Family history affected Joseph and his brothers. Using craftiness and deceit, Jacob received Esau's inheritance and the blessing of their father, Isaac (Gen. 25:27-34; 27:33-36).² Later, God spoke to Jacob in a dream and he worshiped Him at Bethel (28:11-22). Laban deceived Jacob into marrying Leah; afterward Jacob had to work seven more years before he could marry his beloved Rachel. Leah produced Jacob's children, in a loveless marriage. The sisters, Rachel and Leah, bickered. Rachel remained childless and blamed Jacob as she watched Leah and two slaves give sons to Jacob (29:16-30:21).

Rachel finally gave birth to Joseph, who met 10 half-brothers and 3 stepmothers (30:22-24). Confusion reigned. Rachel and Leah disliked their father. Jacob felt cheated by his father-in-law. Rachel stole her father's gods and used a lie to cover her actions (31:4-7,14-15,34-35).

Yet, Jacob led his household in spiritual markers, events that honored God and showed His work. Jacob wrestled with an angel all night; as a result, the Lord changed his name to Israel (32:24-32). Another time, Jacob's kinfolk worshiped at Bethel. He encouraged everyone to forsake foreign gods. These spiritual markers offered opportunities to worship God.³

Top left: Star Ceiling at Abu Sir dates from the 5th Dynasty and is reminiscent of Joseph's dream.

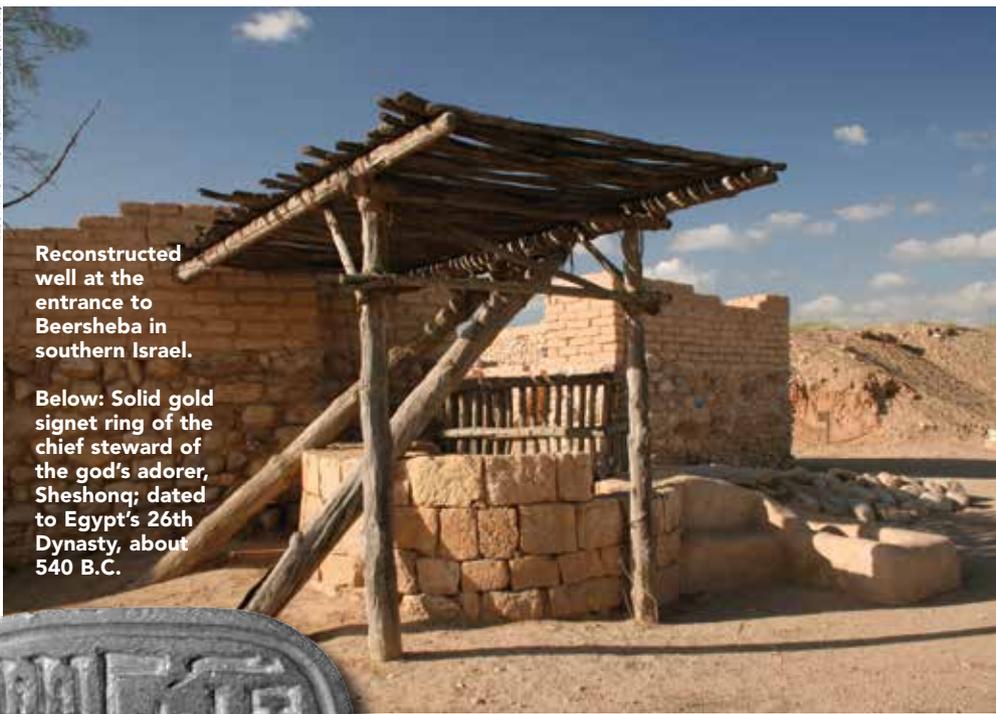
Left: Wheat sheaves in a field. Joseph's dreams about the constellations and sheaves bowing

to him, along with his father's favoritism toward him, placed him at odds with his brothers.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRENT BRUCE (608862)

Reconstructed well at the entrance to Beersheba in southern Israel.

Below: Solid gold signet ring of the chief steward of the god's adorer, Sheshonq; dated to Egypt's 26th Dynasty, about 540 B.C.



Sold into Slavery

Family dysfunction continued. A gift encouraged hatred. Jacob gave Joseph a garment, often described as many-colored (37:3-4). Some scholars, however, emphasize the robe's long sleeves and long length. The style definitely resembled royal clothing.⁴ The brothers felt unloved by their father; they hated Joseph. The young man shared two dreams, each suggesting his family would bow to him. The brothers demanded, "Are you really going to reign over us?" (v. 8). Tension and hatred increased.

As 17-year-old Joseph checked on his brothers and their flock, they discussed "that dreamer." Except for Reuben, the envious group stripped off Joseph's robe, threw the boy in an empty pit, and sold him to an Ishmaelite spice caravan. Joseph journeyed toward Egypt. The schemers dipped the hated coat in goat blood. Naturally, Jacob believed a vicious animal devoured his cherished child. Guilty sons and innocent daughters fervently tried to comfort their father. The grieving man refused any comfort (vv. 19-35). A sign of extreme mourning, Jacob put on sackcloth, a coarse cloth made from goat's hair.⁵

Joseph in Egypt

God accompanied Joseph to Egypt—land of pharaohs and idols (39:1-2). The Nile River provided fish, waterfowl, fertile cropland, and reed pastures for cattle.⁶ Though innocent and a slave, Joseph landed

RING: ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ DAVID ROGERS/ BRITISH MUSEUM/ LONDON (496/29A)

STAR CEILING: ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ (15/24/16)

SHEAVES: ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO

in an Egyptian prison. There, he heard two dreams and predicted the release of Pharaoh's cupbearer. The cupbearer left prison, but forgot Joseph (39:7-20; 40:12-15).

Two dreams troubled Pharaoh. Seven well-fed cows walked from the Nile River and grazed among the reeds. Seven ugly, thin cows ate the healthy cows. Then, he dreamed about plump and anemic stalks of grain. Pharaoh's cupbearer remembered Joseph, still in the dungeon. The hastily summoned prisoner predicted seven plenteous years, followed by seven lean years. The pleased Pharaoh promoted Joseph over grain storage, and gave him a wife. Joseph supervised crops during seven bountiful years and welcomed two sons. Famine arrived. The man who once lacked food and water in a pit, now sold grain to starving people (37:23-24; 41:37-57).

Family Reunion

One day, 10 Israelite brothers bowed before the powerful Egyptian. Joseph recognized these men, but decided to test their character. He spoke harshly through an interpreter and accused the travelers of spying. After the brothers endured a brief imprisonment, Joseph listened to their conversation. They feared God, and regretted selling their little brother. Joseph requested to see their "youngest brother" on the next trip (42:1-22). Nine puzzled brothers returned home with food and agreed to leave Simeon with the demanding Egyptian grain supervisor. Later, the hungry siblings returned

with Benjamin. Joseph accused Benjamin of thievery and threatened him with slavery. Judah, who had eagerly sold Joseph, pleaded to take Benjamin's place. Judah worried his father might die if he lost Benjamin (37:26-28; 44:14-34).

Joseph recognized his brothers' changed hearts and identified himself. The speechless brothers saw a man wearing royal clothing, a gold chain, and Pharaoh's signet ring. Joseph? Had they bowed to their baby brother? Finally, the brothers approached Joseph. He declared God sent him ahead to preserve life; the famine would last five more years (45:3-11). Joseph prepared wagons for their trip to Canaan and the return to Egypt. He urged, "Don't argue on the way" (v. 24). Despite years of gnawing guilt, a promising future beckoned to Joseph's kindred.

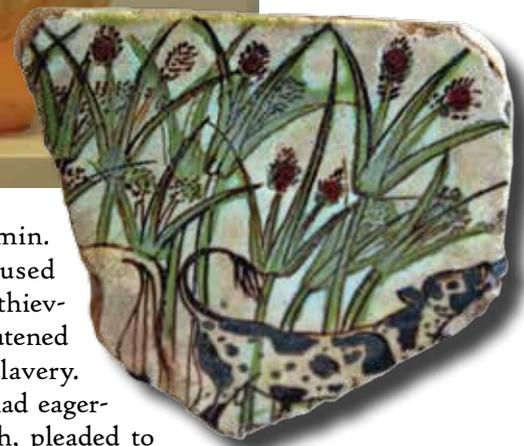
Life and Death in Egypt

Jacob and his descendants arrived in Egypt, and Joseph wept with happiness (46:28-29). He settled these special refugees on good Egyptian land. Jacob died after 17 years in Egypt (47:28). Jacob's dying wish was to be buried in Canaan, at the cave of Machpelah, where Sarah had been buried (49:29-32). Joseph honored his father's request.

Decades later, as Joseph's death approached, he too asked the Israelites to take his bones when God



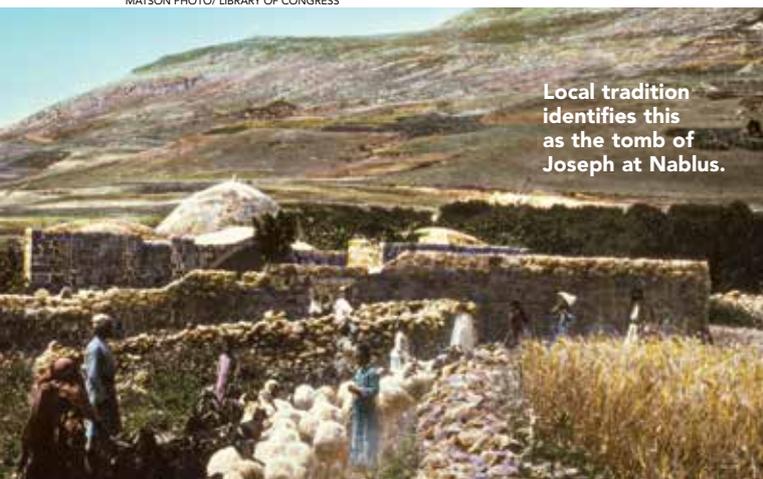
Left: Canonical alabaster cup from Giza; dated to Egypt's Early Kingdom, about 2650-2575 B.C.



Below: Decorative faience tile from Egypt depicts a cow grazing among the reeds. Part of Pharaoh's dream involved seven well-fed cows; these represented seven years of plenty.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ G.B. HOWELL/ CINCINNATI MUSEUM (B5/31/55)

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ G.B. HOWELL/ LOUVRE MUSEUM (B5/8/14)



Local tradition identifies this as the tomb of Joseph at Nablus.

MATSON PHOTO/ LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

A man, his son, and a young water buffalo beside a cabbage field in Egypt. Irrigation fields make much of the land near the Nile suitable for crops.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ MIKE RUTHERFORD (58/9581)

delivered His people from Egypt. Why? Joseph knew God gave Canaan to Abraham's descendants (15:13-16; 50:24-25). Joseph died, and the Egyptians used spices as part of the embalming process. The Hebrew word for "embalm" can be translated "spice, make spicy."⁷ In an ironic twist, young and destitute Joseph had arrived in Egypt on a spice caravan. After his death, spices saturated Joseph's body. The embalmers placed his body in a coffin, in a room (50:26). The silent coffin spoke of God's past guidance and of Joseph's leadership and integrity. As promised, God delivered Jacob's descendants from Egypt. Moses left the land of their bondage, 360 years later, with Joseph's coffin (50:26; Ex. 1:7-14; 13:19).⁸

What can we learn? First, we can learn of God's power and faithfulness. As a child, Joseph watched his father worship God Almighty (Gen. 35:1-15). The name means "All Powerful," and indicates God keeps His covenant with Israel.⁹ Indeed, Joseph experienced God's faithfulness throughout his life. Second, we see that regret and guilt can linger. When the brothers first appeared before Joseph, they spoke to one another about hearing Joseph's pleas for help when they had put him in the pit. Although that detail is not mentioned as that event occurred, the brothers could still hear the echoes of Joseph's cries years later (42:21-22). Also when Jacob

died, the older brothers feared retaliation from Joseph (50:15-21). Both incidents speak of lingering guilt and regret. Third, we see the power of forgiveness. At every turn Joseph forgave his brothers. Likewise, when we are guilty of sins, we can seek both human and divine forgiveness (1 John 1:9). Finally, similar to Jacob and Joseph, we can learn the impact of spiritual marker events. Remembering those marker events can help us honor the way God works in our lives. 🕯

1. This date is from *Biblical Illustrator Old and New Testament Time Line* (Nashville: LifeWay Christian Resources, 2012). Available from the Internet: www.lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator.

2. All Scripture quotations are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB).

3. Lloyd Stillely, "Joseph: Walking with God in a Dysfunctional Family (Gen. 37:1-4)," *LifeWay.com* [online; accessed August 30, 2013]. Available from the Internet: www.lifeway.com.

4. C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 1, *The Pentateuch* (1866-91; repr. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 215-16.

5. "Sackcloth" in Eugene E. Carpenter and Philip W. Comfort, *Holman Treasury of Key Bible Words [TREASURY]* (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2000), 158.

6. Carl E. De Vries, "Nile" in *Wycliffe Bible Dictionary*, ed. Charles F. Pfeiffer, Howard F. Vos, and John Rea (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 1206.

7. "אָנַחַ" (*chanat*, embalm) in Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2000), 334.

8. Keil and Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch*, 265-66.

9. *Ibid.*; "Almighty" in *TREASURY*, 7.

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