



JOSEPH

Ruler in Egypt

GENESIS
50:20
CSB

*You planned evil against me;
God planned it for good to bring
about the present result — the
survival of many people.*

By Bryan E. Beyer

THE BOOK OF GENESIS FEATURES TWO main sections—Genesis 1–11 and Genesis 12–50. Scholars often designate Genesis 1–11 as the “Primeval History.” It describes the creation of the world, humanity’s fall into sin, the great flood, and the tower of Babel incident. Genesis 12–50 comprises the “Patriarchal History,” an account of the nation of Israel’s early ancestors. God’s redemptive purpose for the world took a decisive turn in Genesis 12:1–3, when He called Abram (later Abraham) to take his wife Sarai (later Sarah) and go to a land He would show them. The rest of Genesis reveals the outworking of that call through this couple’s descendants—in particular Isaac, then Isaac’s son Jacob, and finally Jacob’s son Joseph.

This article explores the leadership role Joseph held in Egypt and the authority that would have accompanied that position. Genesis 37–50 focuses primarily on God’s presence in Joseph’s life through all of Joseph’s challenges and hardships.¹ Joseph’s brothers became jealous of him and sold him into slavery. However, through circumstances only God could ordain, Joseph became second in command in Egypt and saved his family from starvation, thus ensuring the continuation of God’s redemptive purpose. We will first look at Joseph’s rise to power in Egypt, then how he used his power to save Egypt and his own people Israel.

Authority Assigned

Pharaoh, king of Egypt, had dreams, and none of his wise men were able to interpret them (Gen. 41:1–8). His chief cupbearer, who had been imprisoned with Joseph, then recounted to Pharaoh Joseph’s ability to interpret correctly his own dream while in prison. Pharaoh then summoned Joseph to interpret his dream (vv. 9–14). Joseph not only was able to provide a credible interpretation to Pharaoh’s dream, but he also proposed a plan to save Egypt from destruction during the coming days of famine (vv. 15–36). Joseph’s interpretation and plan impressed Pharaoh, who appointed Joseph to oversee implementation of the plan (vv. 37–46). Pharaoh also gave Joseph the daughter of a priest for a wife (v. 45)—an act that both recognized Joseph’s importance and strengthened his position in Egypt.²

Genesis 41:40 provides the most details regarding Pharaoh’s exaltation of Joseph. First, Pharaoh told Joseph,



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ (15/23/4)

Left: Stone statue of a vizier, seated; from Egypt's 12th Dynasty; dated 1850 BC.

Above: Excavation site at Tel el-Dab'a; Egypt; the earliest known name of the site was Rowaty, which translates as “the door of the two roads.” Excavations indicate Asiatics lived here in the mid-19th cent. BC. This was the region of Goshen and the ancient city later known as Rameses of Ex. 1:11. Many archaeologists believe the Hebrews lived here after Joseph brought his family to Egypt. After the famine crisis passed, Joseph may have lived here also. During the

late 1700s BC, the name was changed to Avaris, which translates as “the (royal) foundation of the district.”

The Hyksos, who ruled northern Egypt 1640–1530, made Avaris their capital. In 2009, archaeologists uncovered a Hyksos palace belonging to King Khayan (ruled 1600–1585 BC). The palace, at about 107,000 square feet, reflected a Syrian style of architecture. Excavations also uncovered over 5,000 vessels containing bones of animals that had been eaten in ritualistic feasts. After moving here, the Hyksos likely forced the Israelites to make this into city for storage.

“You will be over my house.”³ Ancient Egyptian documents mention this term—one who is over someone’s house—as do other biblical texts (1 Kings 16:9; Isa. 22:15). Earlier, Joseph had served over Potiphar’s house—a position that held significant authority (Gen. 39:4). He now would serve over Pharaoh’s house.

Second, Pharaoh told Joseph, “All my people will obey your commands”⁴ (41:40). He knew this would be the

case since Joseph would be serving as his representative before the people. Pharaoh further demonstrated his trust in Joseph by giving him his signet ring (v. 42), which carried with it the king's endorsement. A king's seal on a document conveyed the authority that lay behind that document; rarely in the Bible did kings entrust that authority to others (Esth. 3:10; 8:2).

Third, Pharaoh told Joseph, "Only I, as king, will be greater than you" (Gen. 41:40). Joseph thus appears to have served as second in command, which corresponds to the Egyptian role of vizier.⁵ Egyptian literature describes many aspects of this office. The vizier might be a member of the royal family or from nobility. The position was a supervisory one, and viziers oversaw various aspects of the kingdom.⁶ They had to be skilled administrators to accomplish the diverse needs of a kingdom such as Egypt.

Pharaoh's statement to Joseph "I am placing you over all the land of Egypt" (v. 41) parallels a title from Egyptian literature: "Chief of the Entire Land."⁷ Viziers often carried this title, though sometimes lesser officials did as well. Clearly the title's comprehensive nature suggests Joseph held significant power and authority. His fine adornment of gold and linen and his riding a chariot while servants announced his arrival further accentuated his role (vv. 42-43).

Joseph married into a priestly family (v. 45), but Genesis never suggests he assumed a priestly role. At the same time, such a marriage revealed the stature Pharaoh credited to his new leader. No commoner would ever marry the daughter of a priest! Pharaoh thus demonstrated his support for Joseph through promotion, title, and marriage.

Authority Applied

Egyptian literature mentions other officials as well—personal attendants of the king who provided services such as medical care, cooking, overseeing the king's wardrobe, and more.⁸ Joseph's position was of a much higher stature,

as Genesis 41:40-45 clarifies. Many Egyptian texts suggest, however, the role of vizier sometimes may have focused on a particular aspect of kingdom administration. Many nobles served as second only to Pharaoh with respect to some area of authority, and may not have enjoyed absolute sovereignty under Pharaoh.⁹

We do not know for certain whether Joseph served as absolute second in command or as second in command over distribution of grain. Clearly, however, his position held much authority, for Egypt's survival lay in Joseph's ability to implement his plan. Three texts particularly illustrate how Joseph used his power.

Genesis 42:1-6—The land of Canaan felt the impact of the famine. At their father Jacob's command, Joseph's brothers journeyed to Egypt to buy grain, unaware they would face their brother Joseph, who "was in charge of the country" (Gen. 42:6). The Hebrew word *shallit*, translated "in charge of," is related to the word "Sultan." Joseph's brothers came and bowed to him but did not recognize him (vv. 6-7). The stage was set for a dramatic scene of vengeance if Joseph so chose.

Below: Dated to Egypt's 12th-13th Dynasties, ca. 1850-1700 BC, a red quartite carved base depicting two provincial governors

prostrate before a higher authority, either the king or a deity; the higher-ranking entity originally stood between the two governors.

Right: Funerary image for the tomb of Djehuty, who was a baker, and his wife, Ahhotep; this sculpture was meant to function as a dwelling place for their spirits.



Right Underside of an Egyptian scarab ring, the ancient Egyptian symbol of regeneration and rebirth. The hieroglyphic inscription

on its gold mount reads "Butler of Nefer-her: Hebi," which identifies the pieces of a royal servant.



GOVERNORS: ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BRENT BRUCE/WALTERS ART MUSEUM BALTIMORE (25/0453) RING: COURTESY OF WALTERS ART MUSEUM BALTIMORE (25/0453) BAKER: COURTESY OF WALTERS ART MUSEUM BALTIMORE



Left: Blue faience cup dated ca. 1850–1700 BC; from the south cemetery, pit 453 in the Memphite region of Egypt.

Above: From the temple at Medamoud, statuary head of Pharaoh Sesostrius III, who ruled 1862–1843 BC, during Egypt's 12th Dynasty, likely during time of Joseph.



Above: Egyptian wooden model, painted, dated about 2000–1900 BC. The storage area in the back is divided into 4 compartments,

each having its own opening in the top. Residents stored their harvest in these type compartments.

They then retrieved the grain via the corresponding 4 openings in the front of the storage area.

him to pardon their sin against Joseph (vv. 16–17). Joseph, however, had long resigned himself to embracing God's purpose for his life, even with all its unexpected turns. As Joseph wept, he confessed his understanding of God's amazing purpose in his words, "You planned evil against me; God planned it for good to bring about the present result—the survival of many people" (v. 20).

Joseph faced many challenges in his life, but in each one, God showed Himself faithful. He took Joseph's life and used it to save His people and thereby continued His redemptive purpose through Abraham's descendants. Joseph used his leadership position to serve those he led rather than to exalt himself; his life paralleled the servanthood of Jesus, who described Himself as a leader who served His own (Mark 10:45; John 13:12–15). Joseph's legacy stands as evidence that God can use seemingly ordinary lives to achieve extraordinary results if we surrender ourselves completely to His will. 🕯

Genesis 45:4–8—Joseph revealed himself to his brothers in dramatic fashion (45:1–3), a revelation that filled his brothers' hearts with fear. Three times in verses 5–8, however, Joseph stressed how God had put him in his position. God had sent him ahead of them to preserve life (v. 5), to establish a remnant and save His people (v. 7), and to preserve Pharaoh's house and the people of Egypt (v. 8). Joseph's life had taken many turns, but he had learned to see God's hand at each one.

Genesis 50:15–21—When Jacob died, Joseph's brothers feared for their welfare. What if Joseph should decide to seek vengeance now that their father was dead (50:15)? They fabricated a story, telling Joseph that Jacob had urged

1. Note the regular expression "The LORD was with Joseph" or similar language (Gen. 39:2,3,21,23).
2. Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, vol. 1B in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 762–64.
3. All Scripture quotations are from the Christian Standard Bible (CSB).
4. The Hebrew literally reads, "all my people will kiss your mouth." The CSB likely captures the sense of the idiom.
5. Alan Gardiner, *Egypt of the Pharaohs: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, rep. 1969), 104–105.
6. *Ibid.*, 104.
7. Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 505.
8. Gardiner, *Egypt of the Pharaohs*, 105.
9. John H. Walton, "Genesis" in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, gen. ed. John H. Walton (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 132.

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