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Why the Joseph Story Portrays Egypt Positively

In the Joseph story, the Egyptian officials, including Pharaoh, are kind and wise. Joseph himself  shaves his beard, puts on Egyptian clothes, takes an Egyptian name, and marries the daughter of an Egyptian priest. Nothing in the text implies that the author thinks any of this is problematic.

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Pharoah Honors Joseph,  Dalziels’ Bible Gallery 1864–81 Metmuseum.org

Within the Joseph biography, Genesis 41 presents the hero’s transformation and elevation under the watchful eye of YHWH,[1] his odyssey from imprisoned slave to “master of his universe.”[2] The adversity Joseph overcomes, being sold into slavery and thrown into prison, are due to the jealously of his brothers and the lust and spite of his master’s wife. In contrast, the Egyptian officials, including Pharaoh himself, are presented as benign and even helpful to Joseph’s cause.

Kind Egyptian Officials

As soon as Joseph gets to Egypt, his Egyptian master sees that YHWH is helping Joseph and reacts favorably to this:

בראשית לט:ג וַיַּרְא אֲדֹנָיו כִּי יְ-הוָה אִתּוֹ וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר הוּא עֹשֶׂה יְ-הוָה מַצְלִיחַ בְּיָדוֹ.לט:ד וַיִּמְצָא יוֹסֵף חֵן בְּעֵינָיו וַיְשָׁרֶת אֹתוֹ וַיַּפְקִדֵהוּ עַל בֵּיתוֹ וְכָל יֶשׁ לוֹ נָתַן בְּיָדוֹ.

Gen 39:3 And when his master saw that YHWH was with him and that YHWH lent success to everything he undertook,39:4 he took a liking to Joseph. He made him his personal attendant and put him in charge of his household, placing in his hands all that he owned.

YHWH rewards Joseph’s master for this behavior, which encourages this trust:

בראשית לט:ה וַיְהִי מֵאָז הִפְקִיד אֹתוֹ בְּבֵיתוֹ וְעַל כָּל אֲשֶׁר יֶשׁ לוֹ וַיְבָרֶךְ יְ-הוָה אֶת בֵּית הַמִּצְרִי בִּגְלַל יוֹסֵף וַיְהִי בִּרְכַּת יְ-הוָה בְּכָל אֲשֶׁר יֶשׁ לוֹ בַּבַּיִת וּבַשָּׂדֶה. לט:ווַיַּעֲזֹב כָּל אֲשֶׁר לוֹ בְּיַד יוֹסֵף וְלֹא יָדַע אִתּוֹ מְאוּמָה כִּי אִם הַלֶּחֶם אֲשֶׁר הוּא אוֹכֵל…

Gen 39:5 And from the time that the Egyptian put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, YHWH blessed his house for Joseph’s sake, so that the blessing of YHWH was upon everything that he owned, in the house and outside. 39:6 He left all that he had in Joseph’s hands and, with him there, he paid attention to nothing save the food that he ate…

It is his master’s wife, angry with Joseph for refusing her, who, out of spite, accuses him of attempted rape and has him thrown into prison. Once Joseph is in prison, we see the same pattern again, with YHWH making Joseph successful, and his new master, the jailer, recognizing this and rewarding it.[3]

The Positive Portrayal of the Pharaoh

When we arrive at the story of Pharaoh’s dreams and Joseph’s rise, we are well prepared for a kindly Egyptian figure to recognize Joseph’s merits and reward them, which is what we find. The Pharaoh of Genesis 41 is thoughtful and rational. He knows that his strange dreams foretell something important that must be interpreted properly.

When his own magicians and wise-men cannot solve the riddle of the dream, he follows his cupbearer’s advice to call upon a young imprisoned Hebrew who has a reputation as a successful dream interpreter. Moreover, in contrast to the king of Babylon of Daniel 2, who threatens his advisors with execution if they cannot tell him his dream and interpret it properly, Pharaoh conducts his search for a qualified dream interpreter without preconditions or threats.

Pharaoh is then appreciative of Joseph, the foreigner, giving him an important position in his administration, and recognizing the power of his God (41:38-39). Later, Pharaoh will generously welcome Joseph’s family to settle in Egypt (47:6).

A Uniquely Positive Depiction of Pharaoh

Genesis 41’s portrayal of Pharaoh, with its implications for views of Egyptians in particular and of royal authority in general, stands out in the biblical corpus. The first Pharaoh we meet is when Abram moves to Egypt and pretends that Sarai is his sister as opposed to his wife (Genesis 12:1-10). That Pharaoh is portrayed as a buffoon, easily duped by the trickster Abram.

In the Exodus account, the Pharaoh is an irrational tyrant who enslaves the Hebrews and refuses to let them go. Their request to leave is met with even harsher treatment, to which God responds with a series of plagues culminating with the death of the Egyptian first born until the Egyptian despot is finally drowned by the divine warrior, the deity himself, at the Red Sea.

The Pharaoh of the Joseph story is quite different. Like the author of Genesis 20 who portrays the Philistine King Abimelech positively in the second version of the story about the patriarch, his wife, and the foreign ruler, the author of Genesis 41 allows that monarchy is a quite useful form of governance, and that foreign rulers can be successful leaders.

This portrayal may be a hint that the tale was written by a pro-establishment, cosmopolitan writer who has positive things to say both about Egypt and about centralized and even absolute forms of rulership. This positive attitude towards Egypt and its power structure is also evident in the way the story describes the Egyptianizing of Joseph himself.

Preparing for the Meeting with Pharaoh

Before meeting with Pharaoh, Joseph adjusts his appearance:

בראשית מא:ידוַיִּשְׁלַח פַּרְעֹה
וַיִּקְרָא אֶת יוֹסֵף
וַיְרִיצֻהוּ מִן הַבּוֹר
וַיְגַלַּח
וַיְחַלֵּף שִׂמְלֹתָיו
וַיָּבֹא אֶל פַּרְעֹה.

Gen 41:14 And Pharaoh sent
and he called Joseph
and they rushed him out of the dungeon
and he shaved
and changed his clothing,
and he came to Pharaoh.

The verse marks an important change, transition, and passage in Joseph’s life. The language connotes movement; Joseph is literally made to run in a causative form of the verb (וַיְרִיצֻהוּ, “they made him run,” translated “rushed” above), and he comes to Pharaoh.

Gain and Loss of Jacob’s Robe

The reference to changing of clothes utilizes the important motif of clothing, which already made its appearance in the story’s opening (ch. 37), with Joseph’s special robe. There, his robe marks him as his father’s favorite, one with greater status than his older brothers. In reaction to this, and to his troublesome dreams about dominating his brothers, they eventually dispose of Joseph, stripping him of his robe, which marks his loss of status.

Joseph loses his clothing entirely, when it is ripped from him by his master’s wife:

בראשית לט:יבוַתִּתְפְּשֵׂהוּ בְּבִגְדוֹ לֵאמֹר שִׁכְבָה עִמִּי וַיַּעֲזֹב בִּגְדוֹ בְּיָדָהּ וַיָּנָס וַיֵּצֵא הַחוּצָה.

Gen 39:12 She caught hold of him by his garment and said, “Lie with me!” But he left his garment in her hand and got away and fled outside.

As a consequence of this, Joseph is thrown in prison. Thus, he becomes the marginal or liminal figure whose transition between former and future status is symbolized by nakedness, an absence of bodily symbols.

From Jacob’s Robe to Pharaoh’s Robe

Joseph’s change of clothes in Genesis 41, then, is an important step in his return to prominence, which is completed upon his elevation following his successful interpretation of Pharaoh’s dream:

בראשית מא:מב וַיָּסַר פַּרְעֹה אֶת טַבַּעְתּוֹ מֵעַל יָדוֹ וַיִּתֵּן אֹתָהּ עַל יַד יוֹסֵף וַיַּלְבֵּשׁ אֹתוֹ בִּגְדֵי שֵׁשׁ וַיָּשֶׂם רְבִד הַזָּהָב עַל צַוָּארוֹ. מא:מג וַיַּרְכֵּב אֹתוֹ בְּמִרְכֶּבֶת הַמִּשְׁנֶה אֲשֶׁר לוֹ וַיִּקְרְאוּ לְפָנָיו אַבְרֵךְ וְנָתוֹן אֹתוֹ עַל כָּל אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם.

Gen 41:42 And removing his signet ring from his hand, Pharaoh put it on Joseph’s hand; and he had him dressed in robes of fine linen, and put a gold chain about his neck. 41:43 He had him ride in the chariot of his second-in-command, and they cried before him, “Abrek!” Thus he placed him over all the land of Egypt.

So Joseph moves from his father’s robe, to being without a robe, to being without proper clothes, to being properly clothed again, and finally to being dressed in Pharaoh’s robe.

Wild Hair and Shaving

Joseph not only changes his clothes but shaves. The emergence from a prison-like state to freedom is often symbolized by the cutting or shaving of hair, while the state of exile, imprisonment, or immersion in chaos is symbolized by out of control hair.

For example, in Daniel 4, King Nebuchadnezzar is rendered mad by God who punishes him for hubristically denying the power of the deity of the Israelites. After he is driven away from society and lives like an animal:

דניאל ד:ל שַׂעְרֵהּ כְּנִשְׁרִין רְבָה וְטִפְרוֹהִי כְצִפְּרִין

Dan 4:30 His hair grew long as eagles’ (feathers) and his nails became like birds’ (claws)

The motifs of shaggy hair and shaven hair also figure in the tale of Ahiqar the wise man, who serves at the court of Esarhaddon of Assyria, and is wrongly accused of treason and forced into hiding. When he is finally rehabilitated and released from a death-like exile, he describes himself as follows:

The hair of my head had grown down on my shoulders, and my beard reached my breast, and my body was foul with the dust, and my nails were grown long like eagles (Ahiqar 5:11).

When the king, now sorry for having ordered his execution, is reunited with his faithful advisor, he says,

Go to your house, Ahiqar, and shave off your hair, and wash your body, and recover your strength for forty days, and after that come to me (Ahiqar 5:13).

The Politics of Hair and Shaving

Joshua Berman, a professor of Bible at Bar Ilan university, has astutely noted that Joseph’s actions are not merely a matter of freshening up before seeing an important person, an example of cleanliness or respect. The removal of hair clearly marks transition and transformation. It is, moreover, a key motif in the plot of ancient Near Eastern court narratives.

As Berman suggests, in the case of Joseph as narrated, shaving is also an important comment on matters of ethnicity and “identity politics.”[4] He notes that the beard marks Joseph’s membership in a particular social group, the loss of hair marks his separation from that identity and the need to conform to that of his conquerors.[5] He embodies a political situation whereby he must conform in order to succeed.

Gen 41:14 employs the active form of the verb; he shaves rather than is shaved. He changes his clothes rather than have his clothes changed. Joseph takes preemptive action, anticipating the modes of behavior most likely to find favor with his new patron rather than waiting to be asked to conform later.[6]

The decision to shave or change one’s hairstyle or dress or to talk differently may be undertaken with resignation or with alacrity, depending upon the situation, personality, and orientation of the marginal member of society, but this is a pattern of assimilation and accommodation seen over and over in cultures that are absorbing newcomers, whether they have arrived voluntarily or, as in the case of Joseph, involuntarily.

Joseph’s Status as a Hebrew

The member of court who advises Pharaoh to seek Joseph’s help in interpreting his dreams, in fact, refers to the foreigner as “Hebrew,” a term often used in the Hebrew Bible when a non-Israelite refers to an Israelite who would more likely call himself “a son of Israel.”

The term “Hebrew” may well be etymologically rooted in an economic socio-structural connotation rather than an ethnic one.[7] In the ancient Near East, linguistically related terms refer to stateless, marginal folk. Thus, Pharaoh’s servant may be referring to the young man’s social position as an outsider in Egypt. Any such slave might be “Hebrew” to the Egyptian.

In any event, for Joseph to become an “insider”—and he does become the consummate insider without whom Pharaoh makes no decision—he must shave and become like those who enslave and dominate him.

Egyptian Name and Egyptian Wife

Pharaoh does not merely dress Joseph in an Egyptian robe and necklace, but he gives him a new, Egyptian name as well as an Egyptian wife:

בראשית מא:מה וַיִּקְרָא פַרְעֹה שֵׁם יוֹסֵף צָפְנַת פַּעְנֵחַ וַיִּתֶּן לוֹ אֶת אָסְנַת בַּת פּוֹטִי פֶרַע כֹּהֵן אֹן לְאִשָּׁה וַיֵּצֵא יוֹסֵף עַל אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם.

Gen 41:45 Pharaoh then gave Joseph the name Zaphenath-paneah; and he gave him for a wife Asenath daughter of Poti-phera, priest of On. Thus Joseph emerged in charge of the land of Egypt.

For Jewish receivers of Genesis 41, Joseph’s marriage not only to a non-Israelite but to the daughter of an Egyptian priest may have sounded shocking. Yet, no negative assessment is offered in Genesis 41, no rationalization, no concern.[8]

Indeed, before Ezra and Nehemiah—or in tension with these 5th B.C.E. century writers who condemn foreign marriages (even when the “foreigners” may be certain types of Jewish women)—Asenath would have been considered by some biblical authors a most acceptable bride.[9]

A fascinating post-biblical work describing Asenath’s conversion is difficult to date or situate with precision,[10] but points to the way in which subsequent writers in Jewish and Christian tradition grapple with, rationalize, and justify Joseph’s marriage to the Egyptian woman.[11]

Tribes Born in Egypt

Of course, the sons of Joseph and Asenath, Ephraim and Manasseh, are the scions of great Northern Israelite tribes, and yet, the explanation for their names in this chapter emphasizes their Egyptian roots:

בראשית מא:נ וּלְיוֹסֵף יֻלַּד שְׁנֵי בָנִים בְּטֶרֶם תָּבוֹא שְׁנַת הָרָעָב אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה לּוֹ אָסְנַת בַּת פּוֹטִי פֶרַע כֹּהֵן אוֹן.מא:נא וַיִּקְרָא יוֹסֵף אֶת שֵׁם הַבְּכוֹר מְנַשֶּׁה כִּי נַשַּׁנִי אֱלֹהִים אֶת כָּל עֲמָלִי וְאֵת כָּל בֵּית אָבִי.מא:נב וְאֵת שֵׁם הַשֵּׁנִי קָרָא אֶפְרָיִם כִּי הִפְרַנִי אֱלֹהִים בְּאֶרֶץ עָנְיִי.

Gen 41:50 Before the years of famine came, Joseph became the father of two sons, whom Asenath daughter of Poti-phera, priest of On, bore to him. 41:51Joseph named the first-born Manasseh, meaning, “God has made me forget completely my hardship and my parental home.” 41:52 And the second he named Ephraim, meaning, “God has made me fertile in the land of my affliction.”

In this passage, the eponymous ancestors of the tribes of Manasseh and Ephraim represent Joseph’s moving beyond his life as part of this father’s household and his successful integration into Pharaoh’s.

A Positive Story about Assimilation in Egypt?

The details surveyed above show the storyteller’s positive evaluation of Joseph’s full integration into Egyptian society. He shaves like an Egyptian, dresses like an Egyptian, takes an Egyptian name, and an Egyptian wife. The people he works for are kind and wise, recognizing Joseph’s talent. This is especially true of Pharaoh, who quickly promotes Joseph to the role of the king’s right hand. All this suggests that the author wishes to present Joseph’s Egyptianizing as a positive, or at least not a negative trait.

The one thing that Joseph doesn’t change is his God.[12] From the beginning, the story tells us that YHWH was watching over Joseph, and throughout the story, Joseph makes it clear that he knows of this. In chapter 40 (v. 8), he tells Pharaoh’s ministers that his ability to interpret dreams comes from God, and he repeats this to Pharaoh in chapter 41 (vv. 16, 25, 28). Toward the end of the story, when his brothers are afraid that Joseph will take retribution against them, Joseph claims that what happened to him came from God (Gen 45:7-8, 50:19-20).[13]

Nevertheless, this loyalty to God is what makes him successful in his new land. In fact, no less a character than Pharaoh praises Joseph’s abilities as coming from God, exactly as Joseph himself had told him. And thus, Joseph is able to remain fully pious while at the same time becoming almost fully Egyptian.

[View Footnotes](https://www.thetorah.com/article/why-the-joseph-story-portrays-egypt-positively)

1. Portions of this analysis reframe and in abbreviated form reprise lengthier discussions in Susan Niditch and Robert Doran, “The Success Story of the Wise Courtier,” *JBL* 96 (1977): 179-193; Susan Niditch, *My Brother Esau is a Hairy Man: Hair and Identity in Ancient Israel* (Oxford/NY: Oxford University Press, 2008); *ibid*., Niditch, *Underdogs and Tricksters: A Prelude to Biblical Folklore* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987); *ibid*., [“Folklore and the Hebrew Bible: Interdisciplinary Engagement and New Directions,”](https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0787/7/1/6)*Humanities* 7.1, 6 (2018). These publications will lead the reader to additional analysis and bibliography. The author thanks the editors for their thoughtful suggestions, many of which are now integrated into the following comments.
2. The language is that of Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Bollingen Series vol. 17: Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949).

בראשית לט:כא וַיְהִי יְ-הוָה אֶת יוֹסֵף וַיֵּט אֵלָיו חָסֶד וַיִּתֵּן חִנּוֹ בְּעֵינֵי שַׂר בֵּית הַסֹּהַר.לט:כב וַיִּתֵּן שַׂר בֵּית הַסֹּהַר בְּיַד יוֹסֵף אֵת כָּל הָאֲסִירִם אֲשֶׁר בְּבֵית הַסֹּהַר וְאֵת כָּל אֲשֶׁר עֹשִׂים שָׁם הוּא הָיָה עֹשֶׂה.לט:כג אֵין שַׂר בֵּית הַסֹּהַר רֹאֶה אֶת כָּל מְאוּמָה בְּיָדוֹ בַּאֲשֶׁר יְ-הוָה אִתּוֹ וַאֲשֶׁר הוּא עֹשֶׂה יְ-הוָה מַצְלִיחַ.

Gen 39:21 YHWH was with Joseph: He extended kindness to him and disposed the chief jailer favorably toward him. 39:22 The chief jailer put in Joseph’s charge all the prisoners who were in that prison, and he was the one to carry out everything that was done there. 39:23 The chief jailer did not supervise anything that was in Joseph’s charge, because YHWH was with him, and whatever he did YHWH made successful.

1. Joshua Berman, “Identity Politics in the Burial of Jacob (Genesis 50:1-14),” *CBQ* 68 (2006) 11-31 (13).
2. Editor’s note: For more on shaving as a way of distinguishing between Egyptian and foreigner, see Gary Rendsburg, [“The Joseph Story: Ancient Literary Art at Its Best?”](https://thetorah.com/the-joseph-story-ancient-literary-art-at-its-best/) *TheTorah.com* (2017).
3. Berman, “Identity Politics in the Burial of Jacob (Genesis 50:1-14),” 14.
4. Editor’s note: For more on the meaning of “Hebrew” in reference to people, see Albert D. Friedberg, [“Who Were the Hebrews?”](https://thetorah.com/who-were-the-hebrews/) *TheTorah.com* (2017); Yitzhaq Feder, [“Don’t Call Me a Hebrew!”](https://thetorah.com/dont-call-me-hebrew/) *TheTorah.com* (2015).
5. To be sure Moses was married to Zipporah a Midianite, the daughter of a Midianite priest, but Jethro is portrayed as a Yahwist in Exodus 18, a far cry from an Egyptian priest.
6. Editor’s note: For more on intermarriage in the Bible, see discussion in Jacob L. Wright and Tamara Eskanazi,[“Contrasting Pictures of Intermarriage in Ruth and Nehemiah,”](https://thetorah.com/contrasting-pictures-of-intermarriage-in-ruth-and-nehemiah/)*TheTorah.com* (2015); Naomi Graetz, [“The Missed Opportunity for Intermarriage and Conversion in the Story of Dinah,”](http://thetorah.com/missed-opportunity-in-the-story-of-dinah/) *TheTorah.com* (2014).
7. See Ross Shepard Kraemer, *When Asenath Met Joseph. A Late Antique Tale of the Biblical Patriarch and his Egyptian Wife, Reconsidered* (Oxford/NY: Oxford University Press, 1998); Jill Hicks-Keeton, *Arguing with Aseneth: Gentile Access to Israel’s Living God in Jewish Antiquity* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2018).
8. The traditional style ending of this tale in which the underdog is rewarded with a wife who is way beyond his paygrade (the boss’s daughter, the princess, etc.) also is a reminder that generally in the ancient Israelite tradition the ethnic status of the children depends upon the father not his wife, a fertile garden into which the identity- containing manly seed is allowed to grow.
9. For the centrality of God to this story, see Susan Niditch, “[Joseph Interprets Pharaoh’s Dreams — An Israelite Type-922 Folktale](https://thetorah.com/joseph-interprets-pharaohs-dreams-an-israelite-type-922-folktale/)” *TheTorah.com* (2018).
10. Editor’s note: For a reflection on Joseph’s relationship with God and his position as a prophet as an organizing feature of the story, see Jason Tron, [“Joseph: The Making of a Prophet,”](https://thetorah.com/joseph-the-making-of-a-prophet/) *TheTorah.com* (2017).