



Egypt as seen by Abraham Background



Culture shock!

Have you ever experienced it? Egypt must have been a culture shock for Abraham when he arrived with his entourage to escape a famine in Canaan.

Egypt's landscape was dominated by a range of the most impressive pyramids alongside other large buildings and sculptures. Over 80 magnificent pyramids had been built before Abraham was even born. His home city of Ur had a splendid ziggurat and an excellent standard of living but this kingdom really had that wow factor. The 'Old Kingdom' had already flourished and ended by the time Abraham arrived, leaving an impressive legacy.

'The Tears of a Goddess'

Sourced by 'the tears of a goddess' according to the ancient Egyptians, the Nile's floodwaters from the melted snows of the mountains of Ethiopia and Central Africa reach Egypt in late summer providing it with a fresh layer of fertile soil as they overflow the riverbanks. The Egyptians rarely travelled far from these waters, which provided such a good quality of life through a vast array of benefits including:

- papyrus for making paper and boats
- flax for making fine linen
- Lotus flowers for perfumes
- fish, ducks and geese
- abundant crops of barley, corn and pasture hay
- wine from fruits, beer from grains
- fruits: figs, olives, pomegranates, apples, palms, figs, oranges, lemons, plums, mulberries, apricots and vineyards
- even flower gardens!

Taming the Nile

Forming part of the 'fertile crescent', Egypt was an excellent place to live. There are traces of people living there as early as 12,000 BC with cultivated plants, fishing, and hunting. As the Sahara dried out and turned to desert, the Nile valley was still quite marshy. New settlers around 5,000 BC brought new skills. The annual floodwaters from the river meant that famine was far less likely to occur here than in places like Canaan which depended on local rainfall. However, it still needed to be controlled and it was important that the Nile flooded to the right level – not too much – not too little. If the Nile did not rise 7 metres at Cairo the harvest would not be a good one. If it rose less than 5.5 metres, there would probably be famine. Flood waters could raise the Nile River 14 meters above normal heights which would sweep away whole villages. The early farmers worked together to manage the waters by creating an irrigation system with shadoofs, trenches and canals. Irrigation required co-operation between large numbers of people both for construction and negotiating agreements about water rights.

First Superpower

Factors such as teamwork over irrigation, drew them together, resulting in the Egyptian people becoming the first nation in history, when other civilisations such as Sumer were still based on small city states, which saw each other as rivals.

Around 3,150 BC King Menes of Upper Egypt in the south, conquered the northern kingdom of the lower Nile making one strong kingdom ruled by the 'pharaohs. Egypt was already a wealthy nation as the contents of royal tombs demonstrate. It remained a world 'superpower' for around 3000 years. Historians have given names to different eras of their history. The 'Old Kingdom'¹ was immensely powerful, wealthy and sophisticated with good education, knowledge of medicine, maths, engineering, architecture, and astronomy.

Medicine

Egyptian medical knowledge of the human body was very advanced due to their practice of mummifying bodies and this helped the advancement of medicine. Their doctors carried out operations using opium as a painkiller. Some of their medicines were good, others not so good. They realised the importance of cleanliness, but they did not realise that animal dung which was used in some medicines contained diseases such as tetanus. Crocodile dung for example, was used in one prescription for a form of contraception.

Pharaoh

Believing that their ruler was a god, was an idea that developed fairly early in their history and was a great boost to his authority, enabling him to become virtually a dictator especially as the office was for life. The Egyptians never spoke his name, calling him by his title of Pharaoh which means '*he who lives in the great house*'. Pharaoh was supposedly Horus, the sky god in human form, the god's representative on earth and the living son of the sun god Re/Ra², sailing in a heavenly boat to join him when he died.

However, Pharaoh couldn't just sit around basking in the worship of his people. He had serious responsibilities and if he failed, he could be in serious trouble despite his divine status. A weak pharaoh could even be assassinated by one of the nobles seeing an opportunity to become pharaoh himself.

As a god, Pharaoh was believed to have certain powers over the Nile, so at certain times each year he performed ceremonies aimed at controlling the river to ensure the waters rose at the required time and to the right level. He was also responsible for practical aspects of this. He had to look after the irrigation system, monitoring the Nilometers that acted as an early warning system, to show the level of water for that year and oversee the reservoirs and surplus grain storage.

The capital city was based at either Memphis or Thebes, but Pharaoh was itinerant and expected to visit each city in the land every 2 years in order to carry out his other roles. These concerned defence, law and order, trade regulation, education, the employment of skilled craftsmen and of course collecting taxes. He had a palace and hareem in several cities.

¹ c. 2686–2181 BC

² spellings of names often vary

Royal Families

A pharaoh had only one queen, but he could have many wives in his harem. The heir would marry his sister or half-sister, usually the eldest daughter of the king and queen. As they were deemed to be gods it was probably considered inappropriate for them to produce an heir outside of their own family. If a king died while his eldest son was a child, his queen would become regent, ruling on behalf of her son. As many children died in infancy, all the princes were much valued and carefully trained with a good education in case they became king. Many of them became government officials supporting the 'royal firm'.

End of the Old Kingdom

Around 2200 BC Pharaoh could no longer control the princes and nobles who became wealthy and increasing powerful and independent. The irrigation schemes were neglected leading to crop failure. Rival kings appear and civil war broke out with fighting between cities marking the end of the glorious 'Old Kingdom' as we call it. The next 150 years saw civil war and the kingdom divided.

Eventually Mentuhotep of Thebes made himself pharaoh and reunited Egypt marking the start of what we call the '**Middle Kingdom**'³ This saw 300 years of peace and improvement, with irrigation schemes repaired and enlarged and Egypt prospered once again.

Pyramids

Egypt's landscape was dominated by a range of the most impressive pyramids alongside other large buildings and sculptures. The famous step pyramid, designed by architect Imhotep was built around 2800 BC. This started a trend and the next 600 years saw the building of over 80 magnificent pyramids, all before Abraham was born. This era, known as the 'Old Kingdom' had already flourished and ended by the time Abraham arrived, leaving an impressive legacy.

The labourers who built the pyramids during the Old Kingdom weren't slaves but ordinary Egyptian peasants who worked there in the flood season when they couldn't tend their land. It was seen as working for their god-king and therefore a religious duty. No doubt the pay was the minimum wage or less.

Egyptian Morality

Egyptian standards of morality and behaviour were high in comparison to much of the Ancient World. They revolved around the concept of 'ma'at'. They believed that truth, order, and balance were essential for the smooth running and harmony of the universe and that it affected every part of life. If someone stole from another, it disrupted the balance of the universe. No one was exempt so it was important that justice was available for all with no corruption or favouritism. There were serious punishments for judges found to be abusing their powers. As in any nation, not everyone kept to these principles of course but it was the measuring rule by which the nation was run, something like a constitution.

The family unit was regarded as being central to Egyptian life. Parents were very proactive in teaching their children the importance of ma'at and preparing them for adult life at an early age. They were also taught morality at school including the importance of justice, integrity,

³ c. 2025-1700 BC

and truth which they believed was the foundation of wisdom. Children were married at a young age with the parents giving support for some years afterwards. In 4

Wives seem to have had a good status and been seen as partners to their husbands. There was much respect for mothers. Divorce was permissible but discouraged. Outside of the royal family, men did not usually marry close relatives or have more than one wife. If they could not have children, they would be likely to adopt.

Adultery was frowned up although it was expected that men working away from home would require certain pleasures. Although prostitution was accepted, they did not have 'temple prostitutes' as part of their religion as did many other nations.

Fertility and fertility rites were extremely important, but they did not include ritual acts of sex in their festivals as did the Sumerians where each year the king and high priestess would re-enact the sacred marriage of the gods Inanna (Ishtar) and Dumuzi. It is unclear whether they simply portrayed this in a theatrical symbolic way or not.

Afterlife

Facing the gods in the Hall of Truth was a daunting prospect for Egyptian souls hoping to enter the afterlife which they saw as being similar to the good life they had enjoyed in Egypt. They believed that they were judged on how they had lived their life by 42 gods whilst Osiris, the god of the dead, watched from his throne. It was important to know exactly what to say at certain times and how to behave before these gods. To help them, the priests would prepare a 'Book of Life' or 'Spells for Going Forth by Day', better known to us as the 'Book of the Dead'. Guided by this manual, they would declare their innocence of a long list of wrongdoings. Osiris would then weigh their heart on a pair of scales against the white feather of Ma'at, the goddess of truth. If the heart were lighter than the feather, the soul passed on towards paradise; if the heart were heavier, it was thrown onto the floor and devoured by the monster goddess Ammut and the soul would cease to exist.

This '**Declaration of Innocence**' which could have over 40 points, varied from one person to another but this summary gives us a good overall idea of Egyptian morality:

1. I have not committed sin. I have wronged none, I have done no evil.
2. I have not killed, terrorised, or acted violently.
3. I have not stolen – food, river water, land, offerings to the gods; tampered with the plumb bob of the scales or reduced the measuring-vessel.
4. I have not committed adultery.
5. I have not blasphemed or cursed a god.
6. I have not lied, slandered, or deceived.
7. I have not caused affliction, grief, or hunger.
8. I have not been angry without just cause.
9. I have not acted with arrogance.
10. I have not snatched away the bread of the child or taken milk from the mouths of babes.
11. I have not eaten the heart (ignored my conscience).
12. I have not worked witchcraft against the king.

Enter Abraham

During the unsettled period between the Old and the Middle Kingdom, Abraham visited Egypt to escape famine in Canaan. His home city of Ur in Sumer, Mesopotamia was one of the oldest cities on earth with some impressive features, but it could not compete with the splendour of Egypt. He had also spent several years living a nomadic lifestyle in Canaan.

Foreigners often visited Egypt in times of famine as it was the 'breadbasket' of the Ancient Near East. Pharaoh's officials naturally took in interest in any foreigners visiting, especially large groups. We don't know the size of Abraham's household at this time but within a few years we read that he had 318 trained men born in his household.

Abraham was entering the territory of the most powerful man on earth at that time. This was different to entering Canaan which had small city states and nomadic tribes. He was bound to be nervous and having a beautiful wife made him fearful. What would happen to him if the king wanted to add her to his harem? Would his life be in danger? Although he didn't yet have any of the children promised to him, he was responsible for a good number of people. What would happen to them, if he and Sarah were both compromised?

Abraham's way of protecting himself, was to tell strangers that Sarah was his sister and omit to mention that they were also married. His lack of protection for her, putting her honour at risk, is shocking. Abraham was still a newbie to the faith, not yet the mighty father figure and man of faith he was to become.

He may have known little of Egyptian beliefs, custom and practices, inevitably different from those he had previously encountered. Adultery was frowned upon in Egypt with significant penalties, but who could tell what a 'god-king' might do, especially if you were a foreigner? Abraham lived in a world where if a powerful man wanted a woman, he often could just take her. Even God-fearing golden boy King David later fell prey to this misuse of power when he took Bathsheba and then arranged to have her husband killed.

Sarah did indeed catch Pharaoh's attention and was taken to live in his palace, presumably his harem for a while. The Bible is discreet about details here, but the outbreak of diseases amongst them, caused the Egyptians to wonder if they had offended a god, and so Sarah was restored to her husband.

- What do you think of the way Abraham handled his visit to Egypt?
- Have you ever been in a situation where you have been tempted to lie for any reason such as a new job, school, or relationship?
- Which of the values in the 'Declaration of Innocence' would you find in the Bible, especially the Ten Commandments, and which would you not? See Exodus 20:1-17 and Leviticus 19:36.

Sources and further information

Margaret Oliphant: The Egyptian World

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Egypt and the Old Testament				
Name of Era	Dates BC	Dynasties	Features	Bible links
Predynastic	From 12,000		Early settlers	post flood
Early dynastic	c. 3100-2686	1-2	Large scale irrigation, brick tombs, central administration, wealthy grew into First nation .	
Old Kingdom	c. 2686– 2181	3-6	Pyramid age , large scale building & sculpture	
1 st Intermediate period	c. 2181-2025	7-10	Civil war - split kingdom	Abraham leaves Ur, moves to Canaan; visits Egypt due to a famine in Canaan.
Middle Kingdom	c. 2025-1700	11-13	Egypt reunited; nobles suppressed	Joseph comes to power. Israelites move to Egypt in mid 1800's
2 nd Intermediate period	c. 1700-1550	14-17	The Hyksos , a Semitic people controlled the north, south ruled by princes	Israelites living in Egypt
New Kingdom	c. 1550-1069	18-20	Ahmosé expelled the Hyksos. Egypt became an imperial power until c.1200 when it began to decline	Moses & the exodus of the Israelites out of Egypt & slavery. c. 1446
3rd Intermediate period	c. 1069-664	21-25	Assyrians invaded Egypt 677-663; became a vassal state	Solomon married Pharaoh's daughter, Naamah c. 960
Late period:	664-525	26-32	609 Egypt defeated Josiah. 605 Babylon defeated Assyria & Egypt at Carchemish	586 Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians. Jews into exile
Persian period	525-404; 343-332		Persians conquered Babylonians & Egypt	539 Persians defeated Babylonians & Cyrus II allowed Jews to return from exile to Israel
Late Dynastic Period	404-343	28-30	Last native Egyptian rulers	
Greek & Macedonian era	332-31		Egypt conquered by Alexander the Great	Also conquered Palestine
Roman period	31 BC - 640 AD		Romans conquered Egypt	Romans conquered Palestine 63 BC

c. = circa = approximate. Early dates are often difficult to determine.

[Egyptian Chronology \(ucl.ac.uk\)](http://ucl.ac.uk)