

CHAPTER 8:

Joseph, Part II; the New Kingdom

❧ BIBLICAL HISTORY ❧

The Biblical History in Chapter 7 focused on the eleventh of Father Jacob's twelve sons: his favorite, Joseph. We read there how Joseph shared two dreams with his ten older brothers, and what those strange dreams predicted: that he would rule them all someday. We also read how Jacob gave Joseph a rich coat of many colors, marking him as his father's favorite. Between the dreams and the coat, the brothers were jealous enough to consider killing Joseph; but at Judah's suggestion, they sold him into slavery instead. The price of Joseph's freedom was twenty shekels of silver, which the brothers collected from some Ishmaelite traders who were on their way to Egypt.

Down in Egypt, Joseph rose from bottom to top three times. The first time, Joseph rose from lowly slave to head of Potiphar's whole house. But then Potiphar's wife laid a false accusation against Joseph, sending him even lower than before. Instead of giving up hope, Joseph set out on his second rise—going from lowly jailbird to manager of the jailhouse.

Being jailed turned out to be a blessing in disguise. If Joseph had never gone to jail, then he never would have interpreted dreams for two servants of the pharaoh: one a doomed baker, the other a fortunate butler. The butler forgot about Joseph until two years later, when his master the pharaoh started having strange dreams. That led to Joseph's third rise; for when the pharaoh heard of Joseph's special skill, he called him up from jail to interpret dreams for him.

The pharaoh's dreams revealed that a severe famine was coming, for which God was graciously giving Egypt time to prepare. The pharaoh was so impressed with Joseph that he could think of no one better to prepare Egypt. Starting in Genesis 41:40, Joseph is the highest officer in the pharaoh's government; and it never would have happened without all the setbacks he endured along the way. God has been at work in Joseph's life from the start, causing everything to work together for his good.

~ The Testing of Joseph's Brothers ~

Joseph turns out to be as good at preparing Egypt as he is at everything else he does. He collects so much grain that when the famine finally hits, the Egyptians are in no danger of running out. They can even afford to sell grain to foreigners—including Joseph's brothers, who return to the story in Genesis 42.

An Ironic Reunion

The famine that Joseph foresaw doesn't just hit Egypt. It also hits Egypt's neighbors, including Canaan. When Father Jacob hears that Egypt still has grain, he sends almost all his sons to buy some. Only one son does he keep home: the youngest, Benjamin.

INTERESTING IDEAS: The number of sons Jacob sends may be an indication of how much his family has grown. We've seen how Judah built a family through Tamar, his widowed daughter-in-law

"Joseph Set Over Egypt"





“Jacob Mourns His Son Joseph”

from Genesis 38. By now, the other brothers have all built families too. Each is now head of his own household, and thus responsible for feeding his household.

Jacob’s reason for keeping Benjamin home goes back to his favoritism. Of the twelve sons of Jacob, only two come from his beloved wife Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin. Now Joseph has been torn apart by a wild animal, or so Jacob believes. He cannot bear the thought of losing Benjamin too.

When the ten older brothers reach Egypt, they find that there is more to buying grain than just handing over the money. Every sale must be approved by an officer of the government, lest Egypt unknowingly sell to its enemies. The officer in charge of selling grain is the same one who collected grain before the famine started: Joseph.

For the first time since he was a child, Joseph has his brothers at a disadvantage. Having left them as a beardless boy in rags, he now stands before them as a bearded man in rich clothes. Between that and the fact that they believe Joseph dead, they have no hope of recognizing him; yet he recognizes them easily. Another advantage is that Joseph

remembers his Hebrew. His brothers speak to him through an interpreter, figuring that an Egyptian like him couldn’t possibly understand Hebrew; yet Joseph understands every word.

REVELATORY REMINDERS: The brothers’ first meeting in twenty years starts with a familiar sight. Joseph’s older brothers bow low before him, “with their faces to the earth”—just as he saw in those two long-ago dreams (42:6). All these years later, what God revealed to Joseph is finally coming to pass.

Of course, Joseph is dying for news about his family; but after what his brothers did to him, he would be a fool to trust them without testing them first. He cannot tell them who he is until he first finds out: Are they the same evil men now that they were back then, or have they changed?

Years of leadership have put a hard edge on Joseph. He starts his test with a terrifying accusation, shouting at his brothers in 42:9: “You are spies! You have come to see the nakedness of the land!” He says it

three times, making his brothers more desperate each time. They try fleshing out their story, hoping a bit of detail will give it the ring of truth. One of the details they add is that they have a younger brother back in Canaan.

Joseph has been hoping for news like this; for Benjamin is his only full brother, the one he cares about most. Now to his older brothers’ horror, he insists on seeing this younger brother. One of them must go and fetch Benjamin, Joseph says, so that he can test the truth of their tale. The rest will stay in jail until that one returns. Until that one sets out, all ten brothers will go to jail. Perhaps Joseph wants them to experience jail for themselves, as it is partly their fault that he spent so much time in one.

Three days later, Joseph hauls his brothers out of jail and announces a change of plan. Instead of sending one brother back to fetch Benjamin, he will send back all except one: Simeon, whom he now

“Joseph’s Brethren Come to Buy Food”



binds “before their eyes” (42:24). Seizing Simeon in front of his brothers is a forceful reminder of how the brothers seized Joseph years before.

The reminder seems to work. The brothers start muttering to each other in Hebrew, thinking that Joseph won’t understand—which of course he does. What Joseph overhears is his first sign that his brothers might have changed. They think they know why he is being so hard on them: because God is finally punishing them for the long-ago sin of selling Joseph. The thought that his brothers regret their sin brings tears to Joseph’s eyes.

Even so, Joseph pushes on with his testing. On the way back to Canaan, one of the brothers is stunned to find that the money he paid for his grain is still in his sack. When they all get home to Jacob, they all find the same thing.

MEMORY-STIRRING MONIES: The money in the brothers’ sacks is another reminder of what they did to Joseph: how they traded their own flesh and blood for twenty shekels of silver. If they keep the money now, then Joseph will know that they still love money more than they love their own brother—in this case, Simeon. If not, then he will have another sign that they have changed.



“Joseph’s Brothers Find the Money”

The Redemption of Judah

For now, though, the brothers are more worried about their father than they are about Joseph. They ask Jacob to send Benjamin back to Egypt with them, assuring him that it is the only way to save Simeon. But Jacob refuses, saying that Simeon is already lost. Oldest son Reuben pleads louder than any of them, offering to sacrifice his own two sons if he should lose Benjamin. Knowing how God feels about child sacrifice, the very idea is ludicrous. That Reuben would recommend such a thing shows how very far he has strayed from God.

Then, of course, the grain runs out. Poor Jacob is down to two choices: let Benjamin go to Egypt, or let his whole family starve.

Even this close to starvation, Jacob still needs persuading. The brother who steps forward this time is the fourth in line, Judah. The difference is that where Reuben offered his sons, Judah offers himself. He says that if he fails to bring Benjamin back, then he will “bear the blame forever” (43:9).

Jacob finally agrees, on three conditions. First, the brothers must take a nice present to soothe the cranky officer: “a little balm and a little honey, spices and myrrh, pistachio nuts and almonds” (43:11). Second, they must take double the price of the grain they need. Third, they must take back the money that was left in their sacks—in case there was some oversight.

Jacob’s third condition matters most to Joseph; for when the brothers try to give the money back, they pass another of his tests. He not only sets Simeon free, but also invites them to lunch at his house. The brothers are enjoying their lunch when they notice something strange. Although they all get plenty to eat, Benjamin gets five times as much as the others.

“Joseph’s Brethren Return from Jacob”





“Joseph’s Cup Found in Benjamin’s Sack”

PROBING PLATEFULS: The pile of food on Benjamin’s plate is yet another test for the brothers. Joseph wants to know if they are as jealous of Jacob’s new favorite now as they were of his old favorite back then. But if they are, then they don’t show it. The brothers’ calm acceptance of Benjamin’s good fortune is yet another sign that they have changed.

Joseph has one more test for his brothers. They are heading home the next morning, their donkeys loaded down with grain, when Joseph’s steward catches up to them. He says that a valuable silver cup has gone missing, and wants to search their sacks for it. The brothers gladly agree to the search, knowing that they haven’t stolen anything. What they don’t know is that on Joseph’s orders, the steward has quietly planted the cup in the last sack: Benjamin’s.

This is the very worst thing that could happen. It looks like Jacob’s greatest fear is coming true; for when the brothers get back to Joseph, he demands a stiff punishment for the one who stole the cup. The others are free to go, but Benjamin must stay behind in Egypt—as Joseph’s slave.

Here again, Joseph is forcing his brothers to face what they did to him all those years ago. It looks like Benjamin is about to become a slave, just like Joseph before him. What Joseph wants to know is, what will his brothers do about it? Will they abandon their father’s favorite again, or have they changed enough to sacrifice themselves for him? The answer comes from brother Judah, who now has his finest hour.

CONFIRMING CONFESSIONS: When Joseph calls his brothers on the carpet about the missing cup, Judah steps forward with an interesting admission. “How shall we clear ourselves?” he asks Joseph in 44:16. “God has found out the iniquity of your servants; here we are, my lord’s slaves, both we and he also with whom the cup was found.” Since the brothers didn’t steal the cup, Judah cannot mean that God has found them out for that. He can only mean that God has exposed their long-ago crime of selling Joseph into slavery.

Despite Judah’s admission, Joseph insists that Benjamin alone will bear the penalty for stealing the cup. Desperate to save Benjamin from slavery, Judah intercedes for him—in one of the most heart-touching speeches in the whole Old Testament.

SCINTILLATING SPEECHES: “Judah Intercedes for Benjamin” (Genesis 44:18-34)

Judah starts by reminding Joseph who Benjamin is and what he is doing in Egypt. The boy is not only Jacob’s youngest son, but also the only son left from Jacob’s favorite wife—which makes him more precious to Jacob than any of them. That was why Benjamin stayed behind the first time the brothers came to Egypt, Judah says: because the fear of losing him might have been enough to kill their old father. They never would have brought him along this time if Joseph hadn’t insisted on seeing him.

Now the danger to Jacob is even greater, Judah tells Joseph. If Benjamin doesn’t come

“Joseph Converses with Judah His Brother” by James Tissot



home safe, then the old man will surely die of grief. Judah can't stand to see that happen, especially since he has personally promised to protect Benjamin. He asks Joseph to make him a slave instead, and let Benjamin go free—so that he won't have to watch his old father die.

Here at last, Joseph finally gets what he has been hoping for all along: proof that his brothers have changed. What Judah says here is the exact opposite of what he did to Joseph years before. Back then, he was so jealous of his father's favorite that he was ready to murder him. Now he protects his father's new favorite. Back then, it was Judah's idea to sell Joseph into slavery. Now he offers to become a slave himself, so that Benjamin won't have to. Back then, he lied to Jacob about what happened to Joseph. He has watched his father grieve for all these years without ever telling him the truth. Now he sacrifices himself for Benjamin, so that he won't have to watch his father grieve again.

Now that Joseph has his proof, he no longer needs to hide his identity. He sends everyone else away, so that he can be alone with his brothers when he finally tells them who he is. He has already cried twice: once when he overheard his brothers grieving their sin (42:24), and again after his first good look at Benjamin (43:30). Now he cries a third time, sobbing so loudly that even the Egyptians outside hear him.

Imagine how ashamed the brothers must be, standing there in front of the younger brother whom they wronged so badly. Fortunately for the brothers, Joseph couldn't be more gracious. He tells them not to be "grieved or angry" with themselves, for it was not they who sent him to Egypt. The real sender was God, Who wanted Joseph in Egypt "to preserve life" (45:5). God has known all along that the Jews were moving to Egypt, for he told Abram so back in Genesis 15:13. He has sent Joseph ahead to prepare the way.

"Joseph Reveals Himself to His Brothers" by Gustave Dore



"Joseph Recognized by His Brothers"

Now the brothers must move quickly, Joseph says. They are only two years into a seven-year famine. With five more years to go, they will run out of money long before the famine ends. The brothers must convince Jacob to move to Egypt right away, so that Joseph can take care of him. If he doesn't, then his family will soon fall into poverty.

If the brothers were stunned to see Joseph alive, then imagine how Jacob must feel when they bring him the news. The lies they told before had him utterly convinced that Joseph was dead. Now they tell him that Joseph is not only alive, but also "governor over all the land of Egypt" (45:26). The news is so overwhelming that Jacob's old heart stands still for a moment. He needs time to recover before he can tearfully say, "It is enough. Joseph my son is still alive. I will go and see him before I die" (45:28).

LOST LANDS: Besides the incentive of seeing Joseph, Jacob also has the incentive of a promise from the pharaoh. For Joseph's sake, the pharaoh has promised that Jacob's family will have "the best of all the land of Egypt, and... will eat the fat of the land" (45:18). Joseph has already decided where he wants his family to



live: in a rich part of Egypt called **Goshen** (45:10). Just where Goshen stood, no one now knows for sure; but it was probably somewhere in the eastern Nile Delta.

REASSURING REVELATIONS: Jacob is on his way to Egypt when he hears news of Joseph from a more trustworthy source. Coming to the old patriarch “in the visions of the night,” God says to him in 46:3-4: “...do not fear to go down to Egypt, for I will make of you a great nation there. I will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also surely bring you up again; and Joseph will put his hand on your eyes.” How comforting for Jacob, to know that his long-lost son will be there to close his eyes for him when he breathes his last.



“Joseph Goes to Meet His Father”

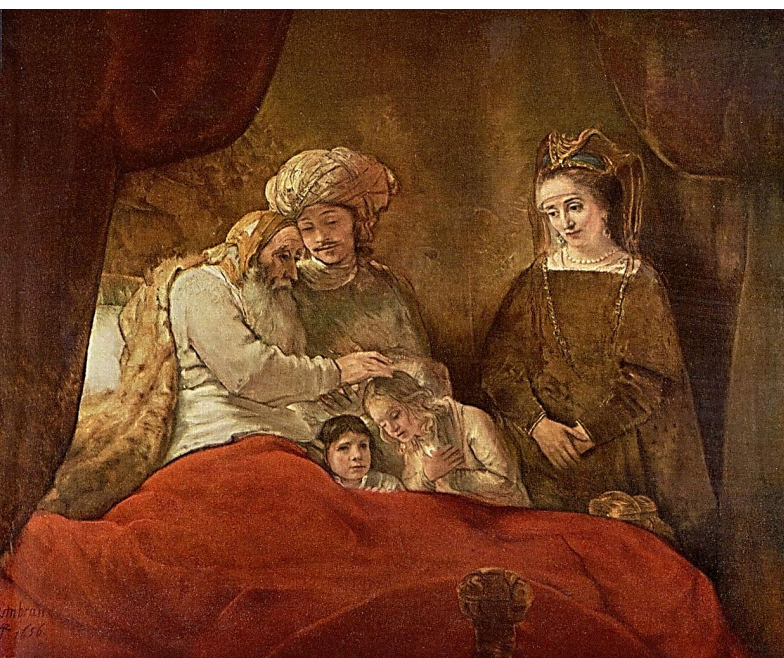
Imagine the mix of emotions that wash over father and son when they are finally reunited after twenty years apart. Joseph is so overcome that he weeps on his father’s “neck a good while” (46:29). As for Jacob, he expects no greater satisfaction for the rest of his life. “Now let me die,” he says to Joseph in 46:30, “since I have seen your face, because you are still alive.”

COUNTERINTUITIVE INSTRUCTIONS: Before Joseph introduces Jacob and his brothers to the pharaoh, he has some instructions for them. When the pharaoh asks what they do for a living, they are to admit to a living for which the pharaoh has no respect. Even though “every shepherd is an abomination to the Egyptians,” they must tell him that they have always worked “with livestock.” That way, the pharaoh will let them “dwell in the land of Goshen”—instead of inviting them to the capital or some other city (46:34).

Since Jacob and family really are shepherds, that may be reason enough for Joseph’s strange-seeming instructions. On the other hand, Joseph may also have two other reasons:

- First, Joseph may be reassuring the Egyptians that his family is no danger to them. The idea of a whole family of managerial Josephs coming to Egypt might be upsetting to some. They will breathe easier if they know that Joseph’s people are simple farmers who have no interest in government.
- Second, Joseph may be protecting his family’s faith. If they moved to a city, then they might be expected to worship the special god of that city—along with all the other Egyptian gods. If they remain in the countryside, then they can continue to worship the one true God.

“Jacob Blessing Ephraim and Manasseh” by Rembrandt



The Blessing of Jacob

The Book of Genesis winds down with some final words of wisdom from Jacob and Joseph. Near the end of Jacob’s life, Joseph brings his two sons Manasseh and Ephraim to see their grandfather. What happens when they get there changes the whole future of Israel. In 48:5, Jacob adopts Joseph’s two sons as his own—no different than Reuben and Simeon, his own two oldest. Since the sons of Jacob are the future tribes of Israel, what would have been the tribe of Joseph becomes two tribes: **Manasseh** and **Ephraim**.

INTERESTING IDEAS: In assigning two tribes to Joseph, Jacob is assigning him the firstborn’s double share of the inheritance—just as Jacob himself got the

firstborn's double share. Jacob confirms this in 48:22, where he says to Joseph: "Moreover I have given to you one portion above your brothers..."

Jacob already knows which tribe will be greater. When the two boys step up to receive Jacob's blessing, Joseph places Manasseh at Jacob's right hand—assuming that since Manasseh is older, he will get the greater blessing. But Jacob crosses his hands, giving the greater blessing to Ephraim instead.

ILLUMINATING NAMES: In poetic scriptures to come, the great name of **Ephraim** will often stand for all the tribes of northern Israel.

The fate of southern Israel hangs on Jacob's next blessing. Starting in 49:1, Jacob utters a prophecy for each of his twelve sons in order. His firstborn Reuben will "not excel," Jacob predicts; for he has defiled his father's bed by sleeping with Bilhah (Gen. 35:22). Jacob also condemns the "anger" and "wrath" of his next two sons, Simeon and Levi—because of the Dinah Incident (Gen. 34). The first son to get a good word from Jacob is the fourth in line: Judah, the redeemed son who delivered the beautiful speech above.

ILLUMINATING NAMES: In times to come, the great name of **Judah** will often stand for all the tribes of southern Israel. When the Kingdom of Israel splits, the southern kingdom will be called Judah. The name of Jacob's people, the Jews, will also come from Judah. The redeemed Judah receives a firstborn's blessing too, bypassing his older brothers to become the new son of the Abrahamic Covenant.

Jacob leaves his sons with one last instruction. When the time comes to bury him, they must do it in the Cave of Machpelah—the one that Abraham bought from the sons of Heth back in Canaan (Genesis 23). Jacob's insistence reminds the Jews of God's promises to Father Abraham. Egypt might do for a temporary home, but they must never forget where they truly belong: in the Promised Land of Canaan.

A LOOK AHEAD: Jacob will be the last to be buried in that special Cave of the Patriarchs. When Joseph's turn comes, his bones will lie under the plot that Jacob purchased near Shechem. But that won't happen until after the Exodus, which won't come for another 430 years—as we'll read in Chapter 9.

After Father Jacob dies, Joseph's brothers go back to worrying about what Joseph thinks of them. They wonder if he still wants revenge on them, and has only been waiting until Jacob is out of the way before making his move.

SIGNIFICANT STATEMENTS: Joseph comforts his brothers with his clearest statement of faith yet. "Do not be afraid," he says to them in 50:19-20, "for am I in the place of God? But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive."

What a surprising idea. What the brothers did to Joseph was surely a terrible sin, something that God in His goodness would never approve. So was the false accusation from Potiphar's wife, which sent Joseph to jail for a crime he



"Jacob Blessing Ephraim and Manasseh"
by Benjamin West



"Joseph Makes Himself Known to His Brethren"

didn't commit. Yet somehow, God used both sins to accomplish His good purpose. What men and women mean for evil, almighty God may turn to good.

CONSPICUOUS COUNTS:

The Number Three in the Story of Joseph

Just as the number three was important early in Joseph's story (Chapter 7), so it is important later in the story. Among other examples, we find all these:

- Joseph's brothers make the trip to Egypt three times, bowing before him all three times
- Joseph accuses his brothers of spying three times, then sends them all to jail for three days
- The brothers take three gifts to appease Joseph on their second trip: a basket of goods, double the money for the new grain, and the returned money for the old grain
- Joseph weeps for his brothers three times: once when they remember their sin, once when he sees Benjamin, and once when he reveals his identity
- Joseph sets three tables for the meal he shares with his brothers: one for himself, one for the Egyptians and one for his brothers
- Jacob rejects three older brothers in his final blessing: Reuben, Simeon and Levi



The ruin of the Pyramid of Senusret II, which once had a limestone casing over its mud brick core

❧ WORLD HISTORY ❧

~ The Second Intermediate Period ~

Since Joseph was so important to his pharaoh, historians would love to know which pharaoh was his. We covered one possibility in Chapter 7. Based on Biblical chronology and the Bahr Yusef canal, we suggested that Joseph served the fourth pharaoh of the Twelfth Dynasty: **Senusret II**, who reigned from around 1897 – 1878 BC. The days of Senusret II came just before the golden age of the Middle Kingdom, which started under his fabulously rich son: Pharaoh **Senusret III**.

If that identification is correct, then the Book of Genesis may offer a clue as to how Senusret III got so rich. Starting in 47:13, Genesis tells how the famine predicted by Joseph worked to the pharaoh's advantage. Since no one else had food to sell, everyone bought from the pharaoh. When an Egyptian ran out of money, he traded his livestock for food. When he ran out of livestock, he traded his land as well. By the time the famine ended, the only land that didn't belong to the pharaoh was what belonged to the priests. The pharaoh collected twenty percent of everything produced on his land, a high tax rate for that time.

A sculpture of Pharaoh Senusret III on display in the British Museum



The pharaoh after Senusret III, his son Amenemhet III, was as rich and long-lived as his father. Alas for Egypt, Amenemhet III left no son to take his place. The family tried putting an older relative on the throne, followed by a rare female pharaoh; but it was no good. The mighty Twelfth Dynasty wound down, giving way to the Thirteenth. Since the Thirteenth Dynasty was weaker than the Twelfth, Egypt slipped into its next time of weakness: the **Second Intermediate Period**.



Some cities of the Nile Delta

The Coming of the Hyksos

One difference between the Middle Kingdom and the Second Intermediate Period was the number of foreigners in Egypt. It turns out that the Jews weren't the only foreigners who settled in the Nile Delta. Many others settled there too, drawn by the fertile land and abundant water.

The more foreigners came, the less they feared the pharaohs. Some of them set up governments of their own, independent of the pharaohs' government. These bold newcomers paid less to the pharaohs' tax collectors, and sent fewer laborers for the pharaohs' building projects.

The result was a disaster for native Egyptians. Before now, all Egypt had been ruled by Egyptian pharaohs. Now foreign

pharaohs started breaking off pieces of Egypt. The first foreign dynasty, the **Fourteenth Dynasty**, broke off part of the rich Nile Delta—seizing it from the Egyptian pharaohs of the Thirteenth Dynasty. For the first time since the First Intermediate Period, Egypt had two ruling dynasties at the same time. Along with two dynasties came two capitals:

- Since the Fourteenth Dynasty ruled the eastern Nile Delta, it needed a capital in that region. The city it chose stood on the main branch of the Nile along the eastern edge of the delta. This capital's Egyptian name was Hutwaret, and its later Greek name **Avaris**.
- The Thirteenth Dynasty ruled from a capital built by the founder of the Twelfth Dynasty: **Amenemhet-itj-tawy**, Egyptian for "**Amenemhet** Unites the Two Lands." The now-lost city of **Itjtawy** stood on the line between Upper and Lower Egypt, marking Amenemhet's control of both.

Being divided made Egypt easier to conquer. Starting around 1650 BC, both of Egypt's ruling dynasties faced some of the scariest conquerors of their day: a warlike people called the **Hyksos**.

Amenemhet I was the founding pharaoh of the Twelfth Dynasty (Chapter 7).

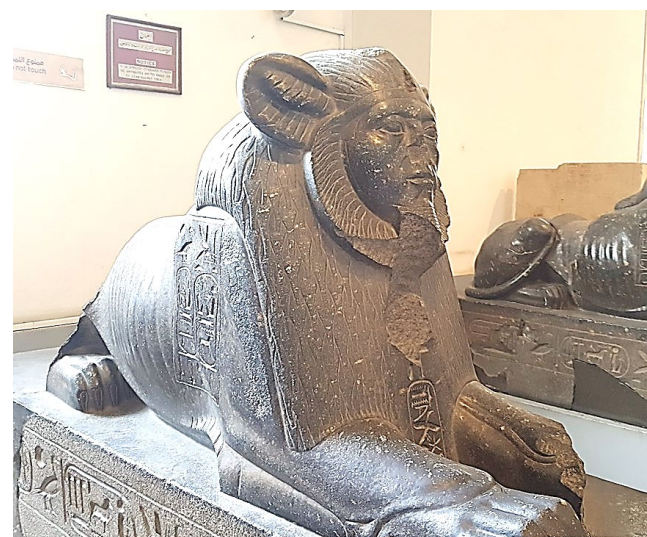
AGGRESSIVE ALIENS: The Hyksos

Like a lot of invaders from ancient times, the Hyksos are mysterious. The hieroglyphs for *Hyksos* tell us nothing about them, as they just mean "Rulers of Foreign Lands." No one knows for sure where these foreign rulers came from, or why they left there to invade Egypt. The usual guess is somewhere in western Asia, which covers too much ground to be of much use.

What is known about the Hyksos is that they had at least two technological advantages over the Egyptians:

- First, the Hyksos fought from horse-drawn chariots—unlike the Egyptians, who were still fighting on foot. Chariots were nothing new, as the Sumerians had them some 1,000 years before the Hyksos came along (Chapter 4); but they were new in this part of the world. It took many Egyptian foot soldiers to resist the speed and power of one Hyksos cavalry crew.

Example of a "Hyksos Sphinx," meaning one carved by Middle Kingdom artisans and later rebranded by a Hyksos pharaoh



- Second, the Hyksos fought with a new type of bow. Where the Egyptians used plain wooden bows, the Hyksos used high-tech **composite bows**. Composites were stronger than plain

Composite bows were made of two or more different materials glued together for greater strength.

wood, which meant that the Hyksos could make their bows shorter and lighter without sacrificing any strength.

The Hyksos may have also had a third, non-military advantage. Some historians say that around this time, some sort of natural disaster swept through Egypt—perhaps a plague or a long famine. Whatever this disaster was, it killed so many Egyptians that the survivors were hard-pressed to defend themselves.

With that many advantages, the Hyksos couldn't lose. Since they invaded Lower Egypt first, the foreign pharaohs of the Fourteenth Dynasty were the first to go. Around 1650 BC, the Fourteenth Dynasty gave way to the next foreign dynasty: a Hyksos one called the **Fifteenth Dynasty**.

The native pharaohs of the Thirteenth Dynasty lasted only a bit longer. The Hyksos soon swept up to Memphis, then on to Itjtawy and beyond. The Thirteenth Dynasty retreated to the old capital city of Thebes, where it gave way to the next Egyptian dynasty: the **Sixteenth Dynasty**.

The Sixteenth Dynasty was the weakest yet. The Hyksos were so dominant that for a while there, the Egyptian pharaohs ruled little beyond Thebes itself. Some historians suggest that they didn't even rule that much. The pharaohs of the Sixteenth Dynasty were like puppets of the Hyksos, conceding everything to them in exchange for a few shreds of independence.

For the next hundred years or so, Lower Egypt had a distinctly non-Egyptian flavor. The Hyksos changed everything there, from language and culture to religion, building styles and more. Their thriving capital, Avaris, was especially non-Egyptian. The people of Avaris had Hyksos names, worshipped Hyksos gods, and buried their dead with Hyksos horses.

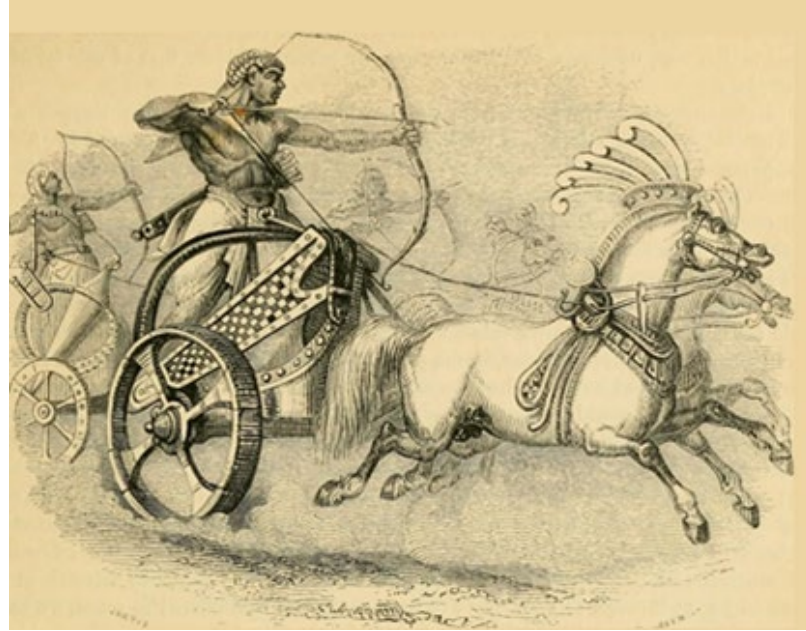
Meanwhile up in Thebes, the Sixteenth Dynasty gave way to a new Egyptian dynasty: the **Seventeenth Dynasty**. The first few pharaohs of the Seventeenth Dynasty were hardly stronger than those of the Sixteenth. It was only later, under a pharaoh called **Sekenenre Taa**, that the Egyptians started to turn things around.

A Pool Full of Hippos

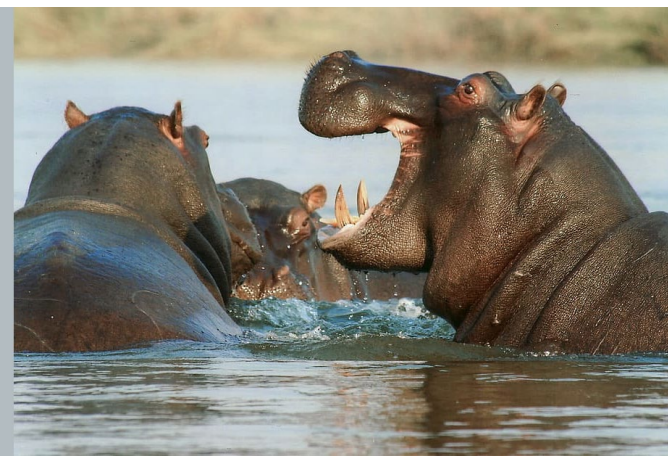
The turnaround started around 1560 BC, when Sekenenre Taa got an angry message from the Hyksos pharaoh down in Avaris: a brash fellow called **Apepi**. The subject of Apepi's message was a pool full of hippos that Sekenenre Taa kept at Thebes. The Egyptians had been keeping hippos there for years without a word of complaint from the Hyksos; but no longer. Now all of a sudden, Apepi ordered Sekenenre Taa to get rid of his hippos—saying that the noise of their bellowing was keeping him awake at night.

Apepi's complaint was preposterous, of course. The noise of the hippos would hardly have carried across the Nile, much less the hundreds of miles between Thebes and Avaris. The real reason for his complaint wasn't the hippos themselves, but rather what the hippos represented.

RELIGIOUS REPRESENTATIONS: Animals played big roles in Egyptian religion. Each god had an animal or two that was



A charioteer firing a recurve composite bow





A falcon-headed Horus spearing a hippopotamus Set with help from his mother Isis, who wears a sun disk between the horns of a cow

special to it, usually because something about the animal reminded Egyptians of that particular god. The hippo happened to be the special animal of Set, the evil god from the Horus myth. The foul-tempered hippo reminded Egyptians of the foul-tempered Set, who supposedly killed Osiris and scattered the pieces of his body (Chapter 2).

The pharaohs also played big roles in Egyptian religion. To highlight his connection to Horus, a pharaoh often played the part of Horus in religious ceremonies. The part of Set was often played by a hippo. Just as Horus killed Set in the myth, so a pharaoh could kill Set in a religious ceremony—by spearing a hippo.

That was probably why Apepi ordered Sekenenre to get rid of his hippos. By acting out the Horus myth, Sekenenre Taa was symbolically saying that he was the rightful ruler of all Egypt—just like Horus before him. Apepi couldn't let that stand. He wanted everyone to know that the Egyptian pharaohs were finished, and that the Hyksos pharaohs were now the rightful rulers of all Egypt.

Thebes versus Avaris

A lot of pharaohs would have been cowed by Apepi's message, but not this brave pharaoh. Sekenenre Taa was a throwback to the warrior pharaohs of the distant past: the kind who led every battle from the front, taking all the same risks his

soldiers took. Instead of rolling over for the Hyksos, Sekenenre Taa went to war against them—hoping to drive them out of Egypt for good.

Alas for Sekenenre Taa, the risks turned out to be too great. When archaeologists found his mummy, the skull was full of holes that were probably made by Hyksos battleaxes. His reign had lasted barely four years.

The next Seventeenth Dynasty pharaoh, **Kamose**, didn't last much longer—perhaps five years instead of four. The good news was that Kamose packed a lot of victories into his five years. To his south, he kept the constant threat of Nubia at bay. To his north, Kamose pushed the Hyksos out of Upper Egypt for good. He may have won part of Lower Egypt too, and even laid siege to Avaris. But if he did, then the siege failed. The Hyksos were down for the count, but they weren't knocked out yet.

The head of Sekenenre Tao's mummy with its many battle wounds



It took one more pharaoh to deliver the knockout blow. Around 1550 BC, Pharaoh **Ahmosé I** finally broke into Avaris and pushed the Hyksos out of Lower Egypt too. For the first time in about 250 years, all Egypt belonged to native Egyptians.

~ The New Kingdom ~

A win that big was a historic milestone. The final victory over the Hyksos meant that the Second Intermediate Period was over, and so was the Seventeenth Dynasty. Even though Ahmosé started out in that old dynasty, historians mark him as the first pharaoh of a new one: the **Eighteenth Dynasty**. The rise of Ahmosé I marks the start of Egypt's third, most glorious time of strength: the New Kingdom.



Ahmose I

The first step in building the New Kingdom was securing Egypt's borders. Ahmose I didn't satisfy himself with just driving the Hyksos out of Egypt. He chased the surviving Hyksos far to the northwest, up into southern Canaan. He wanted no safe havens where these deadly enemies might recover their strength.

Ahmose also pushed his border to the south, deep into Nubia. Before now, Egypt had rarely controlled any part of Nubia beyond the **First Cataract**. Now Ahmose conquered up to **Sai Island**, which stood midway between the Second Cataract and the Third.

A **cataract** is a stretch of river that is too shallow and rocky for boats (Chapter 2).

RICH RESOURCES: What made Sai Island such an important conquest were all the gold mines nearby. In years to come, those mines would feed a fortune into the New Kingdom's coffers.

A LOOK AHEAD: What follows is a short overview of some important pharaohs from the 18th Dynasty. We'll come back to some of these pharaohs in Chapter 10.

Thutmose I

The third pharaoh of the Eighteenth Dynasty, **Thutmose I**, also had trouble in Nubia. He was hardly seated on his throne when the Nubians rebelled, hoping to take back everything they had lost to Ahmose I. What Thutmose I did about their rebellion revealed how far the New Kingdom would go to protect its Nubian gold mines.

Since Egypt still controlled Sai Island, Thutmose started from there. He pushed his warships upriver, headed for two Nubian cities near the Third Cataract: **Tombos** and **Kerma**.

CHILLING INSCRIPTIONS: An artifact called the **Tombos Stele** records what happened when Thutmose reached the Third Cataract. If the words of this stele are true, then the furious pharaoh left not one Nubian rebel alive. "Their blood is like a rainstorm," the carvings go on to say; "The carrion-eating birds over it are numerous, those birds were picking and carrying the flesh..." (Goedicke, n.d.).

The rest of the story comes from the tomb of one of Thutmose's generals. The name of this general, **Ahmose**, probably reflects his father's loyalty to the

Pharaohs of the 18th Dynasty

Ahmose I	1570 – 1546 BC*
Amenhotep I	1546 – 1526 BC
Thutmose I	1526 – 1512 BC
Thutmose II	1512 – 1504 BC
Hatshepsut	1504 – 1483 BC
Thutmose III "The Great"	1504 – 1450 BC
Amenhotep II	1450 – 1425 BC
Thutmose IV "The Dreamer"	1425 – 1417 BC
Amenhotep III "The Magnificent"	1417 – 1379 BC
Amenhotep IV, a.k.a. Akhenaten	1379 – 1362 BC
Smenkhkare	1364 – 1361 BC
Tutankhamun, a.k.a. "King Tut"	1361 – 1352 BC
Ay	1352 – 1348 BC
Horemheb	1348 – 1320 BC

* All dates are approximate

founder of the Eighteenth Dynasty. According to this Ahmose's tomb, Thutmose killed the King of Nubia with an arrow from his own bow. Then he tied his dead enemy to the prow of his ship, turning him upside down for emphasis, and headed home. His rotting remains hung there all the way back down the Nile, showing all the world how Thutmose dealt with rebels.

Hatshepsut

Two lines down the chart from Thutmose I, we come to one of Egypt's rare female pharaohs. The story of how a woman rose to power this time starts with Thutmose I's feelings about royal women.

POWER-PRESERVING POLICIES: Egyptian Royal Marriages

Like most ancient peoples, the Egyptians were male chauvinists in the extreme. A pharaoh's son could take as many wives as he liked, whether they were royals or commoners. A pharaoh's daughter, on the other hand, almost never married beneath her royal rank—lest some commoner try to claim the throne through her.

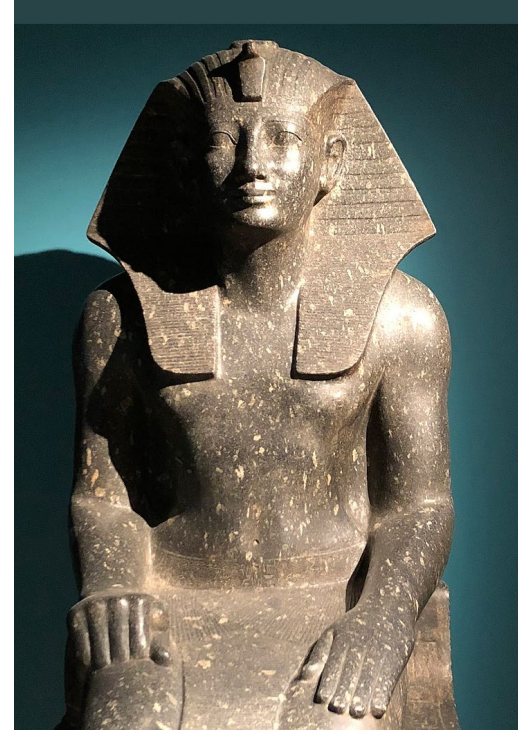
The same was true of foreign marriages. A pharaoh could take all the foreign wives he wanted, the more the better. But if a foreign king offered to marry a pharaoh's daughter, then the pharaoh always said “No”—lest some foreigner try to claim Egypt through her.

With neither commoners nor foreigners to choose from, many pharaohs' daughters were left with only one choice: marrying their own brothers. Most of them married half-brothers, born to the same father but a different mother; but some even married full brothers. Keeping the crown in the family was that important to the pharaohs.

SPECIAL SPOUSES: The Great Royal Wife

Despite the dominance of men, the rank of one's mother was also important in determining royal status. A pharaoh might have many wives, but only his **Great Royal Wife** was truly royal. With royal blood flowing in from both parents, the children of the Great Royal Wife were fully royal—unlike the children of lesser wives, who were only half royal.

Hatshepsut



Thutmose I

The problem Thutmose I faced was that his oldest son, the future **Thutmose II**, was born to a lesser wife. The best his Great Royal Wife could do was a daughter called **Hatshepsut**. Thutmose I worried about his half-royal son, wondering if Egyptians would respect him as they should.

The solution was simple for Thutmose I, if a bit uncomfortable for his children. Before Thutmose I died, he ordered Hatshepsut to marry her half-brother Thutmose II. What the groom lacked in royal blood, the bride made up for.

A few years later, Thutmose II ran into the same problem. His Great Royal Wife, who was also his half-sister Hatshepsut, gave him only a daughter—not the son he needed to carry on the Eighteenth Dynasty. His only known son, the future **Thutmose III**, was another son of a lesser wife.

The problem came to a head around 1504 BC, when Thutmose II died young—which meant that his son was also young. At just a year or two old, the future Thutmose III was nowhere near ready to run a country. He needed someone to run it for him, and his stepmother Hatshepsut was there to help.



Hatshepsut's mortuary temple at right, Mentuhotep's at left, both partly restored in modern times. The Mortuary Temple of Thutmose III is between the two, but has suffered more damage from rockslides.

Just how it all happened, no one now knows for sure. Hatshepsut may have served as regent to Thutmose III, making decisions in his name; or she may have ruled in her own name. Either way, she had all the powers of a pharaoh. She ruled Egypt for more than twenty years, until Thutmose III finally grew old enough to rule on his own.

Hatshepsut was a building pharaoh. She went from one end of Egypt to the other, setting up temples, monuments and sculptures to honor her dynasty and her gods. She ordered so many sculptures that works from her day are among the most common ancient artifacts. Almost every museum that specializes in ancient art has some of Hatshepsut's pieces.

As with most pharaohs, her favorite building was the one that would honor her in death. It is called the **Mortuary Temple of Hatshepsut**; and it stands in the mountains west of the Nile across from Thebes, close by the Mortuary Temple of Mentuhotep (Chapter 7). The difference is that Hatshepsut's temple is far grander than Mentuhotep's. Its footprint is much larger, its design and execution much more impressive. Where the Great Pyramid impressed with its sheer size, the Mortuary Temple of Hatshepsut impressed with its solemn sense of purpose.

LEGITIMIZING LETTERS: One purpose of Hatshepsut's mortuary temple was to legitimize her status as a female pharaoh. An inscription inside puts these words in the mouth of her father Thutmose I: "This daughter of mine... I have appointed as my successor upon my throne... Obey her words, unite yourselves at her command... may she live eternally!" If Thutmose I really said that, then he might have meant for Hatshepsut to be pharaoh after him—bypassing Thutmose II. Knowing how the old pharaoh felt about women, though, many historians doubt that he said any such thing. They think it more likely that Hatshepsut was using her father to assert her claim to the throne.

Sculptures of Hatshepsut worked into the columns of her mortuary temple



A LOOK AHEAD: Hatshepsut is a candidate for the pharaoh's daughter who rescued the baby Moses from the Nile, as we'll read in Chapter 9.

Thutmose III "The Great"

The older Thutmose III grew, the less he needed Hatshepsut to run the country for him. One imagines him champing at the bit, eager for her to either step aside or die so that he could get on with his own rule. The fact that she was only his stepmother, not his true mother, probably made his resentment more bitter.

EVIDENT ERASURES: The bitterness of Thutmose may explain a curious phenomenon. Sometime after Hatshepsut died, someone ordered her

cartouches chiseled off monuments all over Egypt—as if trying to erase her memory. The usual suspect is her resentful stepson, Thutmose III.

Although the perpetrator missed quite a few cartouches, he erased enough to leave early modern historians baffled. It was only later, after historians figured out what he had done, that the inscriptions started to make sense.



A chiseled-off cartouche of Hatshepsut (left) beside an untouched cartouche of Thutmose III (right)

The chiseling came later, though. For now, Thutmose III was too busy conquering to worry about his stepmother's inscriptions. In his first twenty years as pharaoh, this eager young man launched no fewer than sixteen military campaigns. The first was probably the most important, for it led to his most famous fight: the **Battle of Megiddo**.

RELEVANT ROADS: The Via Maris

The cause of this fight started with the road to Mesopotamia. To get to Mesopotamia from Egypt, travelers started up the east coast of the Mediterranean Sea—following a long road called the **Via Maris**. When they reached northern Canaan, they took one of three right turns toward **Megiddo**.

Via Maris is Latin for “Way of the Sea.”

Megiddo was a walled town that guarded the best passes into northern Canaan and beyond. The pharaohs had been pushing up the Via Maris since the days of Ahmose I, bringing more and more of Canaan under their rule. If they wanted anything beyond the Via Maris, then Megiddo was their next step. No army dared ignore Megiddo; for if it did, then the army of Megiddo might come out and hit it from behind.

The bad news for Thutmose III was that the army of Megiddo had help. North of the passes to Megiddo, the whole Via Maris was lined with **Phoenician** ports—from **Tyre** to **Sidon**, **Byblos**, **Ugarit** and more. All these ports lived in constant fear of being taken over by the Egyptians, just as Megiddo did. If they wanted to keep the Egyptians out, then they had to stop them somewhere. When Thutmose III set his sights on Megiddo, the ports joined forces against him—hoping to stop him there.

The **Phoenicians** were a seafaring people who built a trade empire along the east coast of the Mediterranean Sea (Chapter 14).

CONSEQUENTIAL CLASHES:

The Battle of Megiddo (Early 1500s BC)

The Battle of Megiddo turned on a controversial decision from Thutmose III. To get to Megiddo from the Via Maris, he had his choice of three

roads. The middle road was the narrowest, which also made it the most dangerous. If he took that narrow road, then he would have to spread his army out in a long line—leaving it vulnerable to ambush. His generals advised him to take one of the other two roads, so that the army could stick together.

Thutmose figured that if his generals expected him to take one of the other two roads, then the enemy probably did too. Against their better judgement, he decided to risk the middle road—guessing that the enemy would leave it unguarded.

Fortunately for Thutmose, he guessed right. When he reached the end of the middle road, his enemies were far away guarding the other two roads. They had to rush back to Megiddo right away, lest Thutmose take the city without a fight.

If Thutmose had taught his army more discipline, then the Battle of Megiddo might have turned out even better for him than it did. After a hard fight the next day, the enemy army started retreating. The Egyptians were on



their way to stop them when they noticed the loot left behind in the enemy camp. Lured off-task by all the loot, they let the enemy escape behind the city walls.

Even so, Thutmose got what he came for. After a siege of half a year or more, the enemy finally came out and surrendered Megiddo. With that important win under his belt, Thutmose controlled almost the whole west coast of Canaan.

Besides conquering in Canaan, Thutmose also conquered in Nubia. He pushed farther up the Nile than any pharaoh before him, getting as far as the Fourth Cataract. The Egyptian Empire was never bigger than it was in the days of Thutmose III, which explains how he got his honored nickname: **Thutmose the Great**.

Amenhotep II

The empire was just as big under the next Eighteenth Dynasty pharaoh, Thutmose's son

Amenhotep II. Like his famous father before him, Amenhotep put defending the empire first. He led at least two campaigns in the north, fighting off rebels in Canaan and Syria. He also tangled with a much more potent rival: the **Mitanni Empire**, which we'll get to in Chapter 10.

ARROGANT INSCRIPTIONS: As a fighting pharaoh, Amenhotep valued fighting skills above all others. One ancient writing boasts of his great skill with a composite bow, saying that he could pierce a copper plate as thick as his palm without ever losing control of his chariot. Another writing boasts of his great skill with

horses, saying that no one understood them better than he.

The irony is that before the Hyksos came, most Egyptians had never heard of composite bows or horse-drawn chariots. Now they were Amenhotep's favorite weapons, and he owed it all to Egypt's former worst enemies.

A LOOK AHEAD: Amenhotep II is a candidate for Pharaoh of the Exodus, the hard-hearted one who refused to let Moses' people go—as we'll read in Chapter 9.

Amenhotep II wielding two signs of authority, the crook and flail, in an ancient wall painting



The Egyptian Empire at its biggest

Thutmose IV “The Dreamer”

The next generation faced an unforeseen problem. Since the firstborn son was usually first in line for the throne, everyone expected the firstborn of Amenhotep II to be the next pharaoh. But then something happened to the firstborn—just what, no one now knows. If Amenhotep II was indeed the Pharaoh of the Exodus, then his firstborn son would have died in the awful Plague of the Firstborn (Chapter 9).

Whatever happened to the firstborn, he was out of the picture—which meant that younger sons were now eligible for his spot. The son who claimed the spot, the future Pharaoh **Thutmose IV**, did so in a way that raised a lot of eyebrows.



Thutmose IV pouring an offering to the sphinx-god in an illustration from the Dream Stele

FAVORABLE FALSEHOODS: The Dream of Thutmose IV

The story starts with the future Thutmose IV out on a hunting trip. He was ranging through Giza, admiring the three great pyramids there, when he caught sight of the Great Sphinx. The young prince plopped down against the old sculpture, planning to rest in its shade for a while.

By New Kingdom times, the pyramids at Giza were already 1,000 years old. The Old Kingdom pharaohs who built them were all but forgotten, despite all they had done to ensure their remembrance. As for the Great Sphinx, it had been neglected for so long that it was mostly buried in sand—with only its head left sticking out.

The young prince's hunting trip changed all that. As he leaned against the Great Sphinx that day, the long-

ignored sphinx-god supposedly spoke to him in a dream—saying that it was tired of being ignored. If the prince would dig out and repair the Great Sphinx, the god said, then it would arrange things so that he would be the next pharaoh—instead of one of his brothers.

Whether or not the sphinx-god really spoke to Thutmose IV, the young pharaoh honored the deal. Upon taking his father's place, he immediately set about restoring the Great Sphinx to its former glory. He also carved a monument to commemorate his dream: the famous **Dream Stele**, which still stands between the sphinx's front paws.

A **stele** or stela is a large, smoothed stone carved with figures and/or writing and set up as a monument.

Amenhotep III “The Magnificent”

By this time, the Eighteenth Dynasty was getting outrageously rich. With gold flowing in from Nubia, and tribute payments from Canaan and beyond, the pharaohs had enough money to indulge their every whim. No pharaoh indulged himself more than the next one, **Amenhotep III**.

Amenhotep III was another building pharaoh—like Hatshepsut, only richer. He built many new temples and monuments, and remodeled many more. He also ordered at least 250 sculptures of himself, more than any other pharaoh. The two biggest are called the Colossi of **Memnon**; and they

were once part of his biggest, most self-indulgent building: the **Mortuary Temple of Amenhotep III**.

The name **Memnon** comes from Greek myths about the Trojan War, which we'll get to in Chapter 18. Memnon was an African hero who fought well in that war, until he was bested by the Greek hero Achilles. The Greeks called these colossal statues “Memnon” because they reminded them of the myth, not because they were really of Memnon.

MASSIVE MEMORIALS: The Colossi of Memnon

The **Colossi of Memnon** are two stunningly massive statues of

Amenhotep III that once guarded his great mortuary temple. Each was carved from a solid block of stone almost 60 feet long, and weighing more than 250 tons. These blocks were so heavy that they probably couldn't be floated on the Nile, and so had to be carted from the quarry overland. If the usual analysis is right, then they came from a quarry down near Memphis—more than 400 miles from Amenhotep's temple, which stood just across the river from Thebes. To call the pharaoh who ordered them “self-indulgent” is a massive understatement.

The Dream Stele between the paws of the Great Sphinx





The Colossi of Memnon sitting across the Nile from the former Thebes

The temple behind the Colossi of Memnon was even more stunning. The Mortuary Temple of Amenhotep III covered an incredible ninety acres, seven times the area of the Great Pyramid of Giza. It also housed a dizzying number of sculptures, including several more than twenty feet tall. The richest pharaoh of the Eighteenth Dynasty could afford the richest memorial, and that was just what Amenhotep III got.

WEATHER-RELATED WOES: Alas for Amenhotep, he chose the wrong spot for his memorial. Hatshepsut wisely

built her mortuary temple in the mountains west of the Nile, where the yearly floods couldn't touch it no matter how high they rose. But Amenhotep built his on the west bank of the Nile, probably because he wanted everyone in Thebes to admire it. The floods wore away bits of the temple every year, and the occasional earthquake didn't help either. The shoddier it grew, the more later pharaohs pilfered stone from it for their own projects. In modern times, there is almost nothing left of the Mortuary Temple of Amenhotep III.

Mortuary temples were busy places in their day, full of priests offering sacrifices and servicing their idols. Never were they busier than during a yearly remembrance called the **Beautiful Festival of the Valley**.

PURPOSEFUL PARTIES: The Beautiful Festival of the Valley

The Beautiful Festival of the Valley was a summertime celebration that probably started in Middle Kingdom times, lapsed during the Second Intermediate Period, and then picked up again in New Kingdom times. Once each year, the priests of **Amun** carried an idol of Amun out on a grand parade through Thebes. Food and wine flowed freely as Egyptians gathered to enjoy the spectacle. The rich clothes, the colorful makeup, the gold and silver jewelry on the idol, the lavish decorations on the ceremonial **barque**—everything was perfectly placed to inspire awe.

Although the parade route changed over the years, the ideas stayed the same. The idol always started from one of the main temples of Amun at Thebes. After parading through the city for a while, it crossed over to the west bank of the Nile—like the sun crossing from east to west. The parade ended with trips to the mortuary temples across the Nile from Thebes. The idol would have passed through Mentuhotep's temple in his day,

Amun was the special god of Thebes.

A **barque** was a type of boat that was often seen on the Nile, and therefore popular in Egyptian mythology. The sun God Ra was said to tow the sun across the sky each day with his solar barque.

Hatshepsut's in hers, Thutmose III's in his, and Amenhotep III's in his. Amun was paying visits to his dead, strengthening the connection between himself and the pharaohs.

A ceremonial barque like the ones used in the Beautiful Festival of the Valley



Amenhotep IV "The Heretic"

Egyptian religion changed a lot over the centuries. Back in Old Kingdom times, when the capital was

at Memphis, worship focused on a Memphite creator called Ptah (Chapter 2). When the capital moved to Thebes, the focus shifted to the special god of Thebes: another creator called **Amun**. By New Kingdom times, Amun had a strong connection to the sun god Ra. Egyptians now thought of them as **Amun-Ra**, blending the long-ago act of creation with the daily act of bringing creation to light.

The next pharaoh of the Eighteenth Dynasty, **Amenhotep IV**, took the sun god idea a step farther. This Amenhotep paid less worship to Amun, and more to the sun god. By the fifth year of his reign, he was saying that no other god mattered anymore. He wanted all Egyptians to worship the sun god alone, whom he now called the **Aten**.

To make the Aten the primary god of Egypt would require nothing less than a revolution. There were temples to Amun-Ra all over the country, especially in Thebes. The priests who ran those temples were some of the richest, most powerful people in all Egypt. Now Amenhotep IV wanted to close all those temples, which would rob all those priests of their power.



Amenhotep IV / Akhenaten

ILLUMINATING NAMES: Akhenaten

To prove how serious he was about his revolution, Amenhotep IV took the unheard-of step of changing his birth name. His old name meant “Amun is Satisfied in Me,” which obviously wouldn’t do for a prophet of the Aten. Now he switched to **Akhenaten**, meaning “Most Useful to the Aten.”

SACERDOTAL CITIES: Akhetaten / Amarna

The next step in Akhenaten’s revolution was building a new capital. Early in his reign, Akhenaten tried building temples to the Aten on the outskirts of Thebes. But that didn’t accomplish his purpose; for the old temples were still there, still honoring the tired old Amun. The only way to make the Aten supreme was to build a whole new capital just for him.

Akhenaten chose his spot well. Some 200 miles down the Nile from Thebes, about midway between there and Memphis, the Nile Valley widened enough to make room for a city on its east side. No one had ever built on this spot before, making it a clean slate for the Aten. Better yet, the cliffs to the east were shaped like the hieroglyph for “horizon”—which made it perfect for a god who rose over the horizon each day. The shape of the cliffs was partly why Akhenaten called his new capital **Akhetaten**, Egyptian for “Horizon of the Aten.” In years to come, Akhetaten would be better known as **Amarna**.

Akhenaten and his great royal wife, Queen Nefertiti, worshipping the Aten in an illustration from a tomb at Akhetaten



SACERDOTAL SONGS: “The Great Hymn to the Aten”

The last step in Akhenaten’s revolution was a whole new form of worship, starting with a hymn written by the pharaoh himself. Now called **The Great Hymn to**

the **Aten**, this hymn describes a religion unlike anything Egypt had ever seen before. Gone were Osiris, Horus, Isis, and all the other gods from the old death cult. Akhenaten praised the Aten alone for everything—from creation to the darkness of night, the light of day, fertility, even destiny. He almost sounded like Moses or David when he wrote: “Thou didst create the world according to thy desire / whilst thou wert alone: all men, cattle, and wild beasts / whatever is on earth, going upon feet / and what is on high, flying with wings.”

If the Great Hymn had stopped there, then maybe more worshipers might have taken Akhenaten at his word. It was what he wrote later that raised worshipers’ eyebrows. Near the end of the Great Hymn, Akhenaten wrote himself into the story with phrases like these: “Thou are in my heart / and there is no other that knows thee save thy son [Akhenaten] / for thou hast made him well-versed in thy plans and in thy strength” (Wilson, n.d.).

In other words, Akhenaten was saying that he alone knew how to approach the Aten. Priests were good enough for other gods, but only the pharaoh himself would do for this one. No matter where in Egypt one lived, the only proper way to worship the Aten was with Akhenaten at Akhetaten.

Two examples of Amun’s name after repairs. After Akhenaten died, the priests of Amun had the chiseled-out names polished smooth and then re-inscribed deeper in the stone.



Akhenaten worshipping the Aten in the form of a sphinx

INTERESTING IDEAS: Some historians find a political purpose in these self-honoring lines of the Great Hymn. They suggest that the real reason Akhenaten wanted to change religions was not because he believed in the Aten, but because the priests of Amun were getting too rich and powerful to suit him. In prying believers away from Amun, he also diminished the power of the priests of Amun.

MORE EVIDENT ERASURES: Whatever his true beliefs, Akhenaten was determined to make his new religion stick. His determination showed in the eleventh year of his reign, when he suddenly ordered the name of Amun struck off everything. Work crews fanned out all over Egypt, looking for temples and monuments with Amun’s name carved into them. Wherever they found them, they chiseled them down until they were unreadable. They also chiseled down names that included the name of Amun—including that of Akhenaten’s own father, Amenhotep III.

Alas for Akhenaten, his new religion didn’t stick. His mummy was hardly tucked into its sarcophagus when the priests of Amun restored the old religion and moved the capital back to Thebes. The change shows in Akhenaten’s son, who had two names like his father—only in reverse. The son started as **Tutankhaten**, which honored the Aten; but he ended as **Tutankhamun**, which honored Amun. This was the now-famous “King Tut,” whom we’ll get to in Chapter 10.



**The Nefertiti Bust on display
at a museum in Berlin, Germany**

BEGUILING BEAUTIES: Queen Nefertiti

Hatshepsut wasn't the only powerful woman of the Eighteenth Dynasty. There are hints that Akhenaten's great royal wife, Queen Nefertiti, also wielded a great deal of power at times. Some historians suggest that the pharaoh after Akhenaten, a short-lived one called **Smenkhkare**, was really Nefertiti in disguise. They imagine her clinging to power long after her husband died, fighting to maintain Akhetaten and its Aten-worship. They also imagine the priests of Amun ganging up on young Tutankhaten, pressuring the boy to push his stepmother aside and return to Thebes.

Besides being exceptionally powerful, Nefertiti was also exceptionally beautiful. One evidence of her beauty is the name "Nefertiti," which means simply "The Beauty Has Come." But the best evidence is a stunning artifact found in the ruins of Akhetaten.

FASCINATING FINDS: The Nefertiti Bust

It happened in AD 1912, when some German archaeologists were excavating the ruin of Akhetaten—which Arabic-speaking Egyptians had since dubbed al-Amarna. The Germans were digging through the studio of an ancient artist

called Thutmose, finding mostly unfinished pieces, when they happened upon what must have been his masterpiece: a finely sculpted, expertly colored bust of a royal woman. Its fine-featured head balanced perfectly on its long, graceful neck. Based on the crown and other clues, the Germans knew right away who this must be: Queen Nefertiti, great royal wife to Pharaoh Akhenaten.

The Germans also knew that the **Nefertiti Bust** was something special, and they very much wanted it for Germany. Alas, there was a problem. In exchange for permission to excavate, they had promised the Egyptians first choice of all the artifacts they found. A beauty like the Nefertiti Bust was sure to be first on the Egyptians' list, unless the Germans found a way to distract them.

Different storytellers offer different versions of how the Germans distracted the Egyptians. Some say that they hid the bust's beauty by covering it with grime and/or stuffing it in a non-descript box. Some also say that the Germans lied about the bust—claiming that it was poured from cheap plaster, when it was really carved from rich limestone and then skimmed with a plaster coat. However the Germans got it there, the Nefertiti Bust is still in Germany as of 2021.

INGENIOUS GREEKS: Eratosthenes (~ 275 – 195 BC)

The idea that all ancients and medievals believed in a flat Earth is pure fallacy. As long ago as 250 BC, a Greek mathematician called **Eratosthenes** knew very well that the Earth was a globe—and even calculated its circumference.

Although the details of Eratosthenes' globe measurement have been lost, it involved measuring the shadow of a vertical pole at noon on the summer solstice. He knew that on that day, the sun stood directly over the Tropic of Cancer (about 23° north latitude, see Chapter 23). He also knew the distance between the Tropic of Cancer and his home city of Alexandria, Egypt. The shadow of his vertical pole gave him the degrees of latitude between Alexandria and the Tropic of Cancer, which he found to be one-fiftieth of a full circle. Multiplying the distance to the Tropic of Cancer by fifty, he found the circumference of the Earth to be 252,000 Greek stadia. Depending on how we convert stadia to modern units, Eratosthenes' measurement may have been off by as little as 1 – 2 percent.

