

JOSEPH AND IMHOTEP

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Abstract

If we are looking for candidates for Joseph, son of Jacob, from the history of Ancient Egypt, one possibility could be Imhotep, "vizier" of Djoser from the 3rd Dynasty, at the Old Kingdom. Imhotep was a prominent and glorious "ordinary mortal" character in the history of Egypt and architect of the Step Pyramid. This identification implies that the Exodus of the Israelites would have happened at the end of the Old Kingdom, therefore presenting a cause for the First Intermediate Period. A comparison of the events and characteristics of Imhotep and Joseph is presented in this paper. Two major points in the history of Imhotep do resemble those of Joseph: His help in the seven years' famine and the absence of his tomb in Egypt.

Introduction

Historical background of the books of Genesis and Exodus has aroused questions and debate during the last centuries. The most difficult question seems to be the timing of the period of the Patriarchs to the Exodus. Traditional timing of the Exodus has been to a period of between 1300 and 1220 BC. The problem is the lack of historical and archaeological evidences about the Israelites in Egypt and about the Exodus from that period.

Some archaeological findings from Negev Desert would fit the timing of the Exodus at the end of the Old Kingdom, about 2100 BC. Prof. Anati has presented this kind of timing at the conclusions of his surveys in Mount Har Karkom [Anati 1993, pp. 76-80]. Some questions in the history of the Old Kingdom of Egypt would be solved with the assumption, that the Israelites would have lived in Egypt during that time, from the 3rd to the 6th Dynasty. Those are questions about marshland sceneries at the tombs of that period [Harpur], existence of private phyle system during that time and figures of circumcision in those tombs [Roth]. To mention the names of persons in the time of the Exodus of this timing, Pepi I would fit for the King at the start of the depression, Pepi II the King at the time of Moses, Merenre II the King of the Exodus, being the brother of Queen Nitocris (refer to the story of Nitocris at Herodotus [Herodotus]).

If we go 400 to 500 years back from the time of Exodus, we will be at the 3rd Dynasty. From that time the traces of Joseph and the famine could be find. And actually there is a story about the seven years' famine dated to the time of Djoser (or Zoser), King from the 3rd Dynasty [Budge]. The person, who solved the famine, was Imhotep, "vizier" of Djoser and architect of the Step Pyramid. That connection arouses the question: Could Imhotep be the same person as Joseph? To give some material for that, a comparison of the events and characteristics of Imhotep and Joseph will be presented here.

Imhotep and Joseph

In the table 1 there is a comparison of backgrounds, deeds and characteristics of Imhotep and Joseph in a condensed form.

	Imhotep	Joseph
Elders	Father: Kanofer Mother: "mythical mother" [Hart p. 64], [Hurry p. 24-25]	Father: Jacob, came to Egypt Mother: Rachel, died before Joseph went to Egypt [Genesis]
Childhood	No information about birthplace neither childhood [Hurry p. 3]	Was born outside Egypt [Genesis]
Steps to the position	No information about that [Hurry p. 4]	A slave from prison became a "vizier" [Genesis 39-41]
Solver of the famine	Stele of Aswan [Budge pp. lx-lxviii, 120- 141]	[Genesis 41:29-40]
Meaning of name Imhotep	Meaning 'a comer in peace' [Hurry p. 96] could refer to a person, who has come abroad to Egypt	Joseph came from Palestine to Egypt [Genesis]
Titles	[Hurry pp. 5-9], [Kemp p. 106]	"he made him ruler over all ... Egypt" [Genesis 41:40-44]
He was fami-liar of both parts of Egypt	Architecture of the Step Pyramid is from both parts of Egypt [Edwards p. 64-66]	"Joseph ... went throughout all the land of Egypt" [Genesis 41:46]
Construction of Step Pyramid	Step Pyramid has been made in several phases [Edwards pp. 55-60]	Labour work in several years of the famine [Genesis 47:18-26]
Wise man, counsellor	[Hurry pp. 16-20], [Kemp p.106]	"there is none so discreet and wise as thou art:" [Genesis 41:39]
Wisdom texts	Author of a wisdom book [Kemp p. 106]	"He made him (Joseph)... to teach his (king's) senators wisdom" [Psalm 105:21-22]
Versatility	Architect, astronomer, constructor, physician, scribe, sculptor, priest, etc. [Hurry] etc.	"that which he (Joseph) did, the Lord made it to prosper" [Genesis 39:3,23]
Personal sensitivity	"tender heart towards suffering humanity" [Hurry p. 26]	He reacted as a sensitive man with his brothers [Genesis 43:30]
No tomb found in Egypt	"although his tomb is not known" [Clayton p. 36], [Hurry pp. 27-28]	"Moses took the bones of Joseph with him" [Exodus 13:19]

Table 1 Comparison of the characteristics of Imhotep and Joseph.

Parents

The names of the parents of Imhotep are presented at the late periods of Egyptian history, Persian period and Ptolemaic Dynasty. His father has been architect Kanofer and mother Khereduankh [Hurry p. 24, 98], [Hart p. 64]. Does the name Kanofer reflect the name of Canaan or does its first hieroglyphics, mark of bull, reflect that he breeds cattle? The names Imhotep and Kanofer were common under the Old Kingdom (after the 3rd Dyn.), but Khereduankh does appear only at Graeco-Roman period [Hurry p. 25]. That is why his mother is merely regarded as a "mythical mother" [Hart p. 64].

According to the book Genesis the father of Joseph was Jacob and he moved to Egypt after his son. Mother of Joseph, Rachel, died before Joseph moved to Egypt.

Meaning of the names

Name Imhotep is carved to the base of a statue of King Djoser [Kemp p. 106], so it originates from the period he is said to have lived. Meaning of the name Imhotep is "one who comes in peace" or "a comer in peace" [Hurry p. 96]. Could that refer to a person, who has immigrated Egypt? Would it be possible that the name such as this has been in use as a child's name in the Old Kingdom before the time of Imhotep? It does not sound like a usual name for a child.

The Egyptian name of Joseph in Genesis is Zaph'nath-pa-an'eah [Genesis 41:45], it is interpreted as "Saviour". Maybe he had got two Egyptian names? If Zaph'nath-pa-an'eah would be his "official name", could Imhotep be given for his "birth name"?

Childhood and steps to position of "vizier"

There are no records or stories known about early history of Imhotep: "No glimpse is allowed us of his birthplace or childhood; there is no record of his appearance in the flesh, nor is anything told us of the steps by which he reached the highest post open to an official in Egypt." [Hurry pp. 3-4]. If Imhotep would have been Joseph, it would be better not to remind people of his non-Egyptian origin and ascent from a slave, who was in prison, to that of a high office.

Well known history of early days of Joseph is in the book of Genesis [Genesis 30, 35, 37, 39-41].

Solver of the famine

In stele of Aswan there is "A Legend of the God Khnemu and of a Seven Years' Famine" [Budge pp. lx-lxviii, 120-141]. The stele itself is on a rock on the island of Sehel at First Cataract south of Aswan (Figure 1). The forms of the hieroglyphics indicate that the text was from the Ptolemaic period [Budge p lxii]. As Budge states, why the famine would have dated to the 3rd Dynasty, if it would not have happened at that time. Hurry explains, that Imhotep did help in solving the reason of the famine [Hurry pp. 7-8]. In the Egyptian legend the part of Imhotep in the solution is not clear. What did happen in the "days when I (Djoser) had an adviser ... Imhotep"? Explanation for missing of the advises could be that the text is made for the benefit of the temple of Khnum (Khnemu) about 2000 years after the 3rd Dynasty.



Figure 1 Stele of Aswan: story of the seven years' famine [Clayton p. 33].

There is another record about Imhotep and famine. It is in a hymn in the temple of Hathor in Dendera, where Imhotep "attenuates famine" [Wildung § 96].

The well known story of Seven Years' Famine is in Genesis [Genesis 41-47]. Some similarities between these stories can be found from Table 2.

	Egyptian famine	Famine of Genesis
Advises of the solver to the King	Advises were given years before the famine: "I go back ... to the days when I had an adviser, to the time of ... Imhotep" [Hurry p. 8].	Joseph gave advises to the King seven years before the start of the famine [Genesis 41].
Consulting of god	Consulted sacred books on the subject [Hurry p. 8].	"God shall give Pharaoh an answer" [Genesis 41:16].
Severity of the famine	"misery hath laid hold upon me ... Grain is very scarce ... Men wish to walk, but are unable to move ... Everything is in a state of ruin" [Budge pp 121, 123].	"the famine was very sore, so the land of Egypt ... fainted by reason of the famine", "give us seed, that we may live, and not die, that the land be not desolated" [Genesis 47:13, 19].

Table 2 Some similarities about the stories of the famines

Titles of Imhotep and Joseph

The titles of Imhotep are indicated on the text of the base of a statue of Djoser (Figure 2) [Wildung pp. 5-8]. In Table 3 there is a comparison with the titles mentioned in the story of Joseph.

Imhotep [Kemp p. 106]	Joseph [Genesis 41:38-45]
seal-bearer of the King of Lower Egypt	"Pharaoh ... put it (his ring = seal?) upon Joseph's hand" (v. 42)
first one under the king (preliminary stage of vizier title [Wildung p. 7])	"only in the throne will I be greater than thou" (v. 40)
administrator of the Great Mansion	"Thou shalt be over my house" (v. 40)
prince (title of deputy king, since 4th Dynasty title of the prince who is a vizier [Wildung p. 7])	"gold chain about his neck"? (v. 42)
chief of seers (a religious title) (title of the priest of Heliopolis [Wildung p. 7])	"a man in whom the Spirit of God is", "God hath shewed thee all this" (v. 38, 39)
Imhotep the builder, the sculptor, the maker of stone vases [Clayton p. 33]	"the Lord made all that he did to prosper in his hand" [Genesis 39:3, 23]

Table 3. Comparison of titles of Imhotep and those mentioned about Joseph.

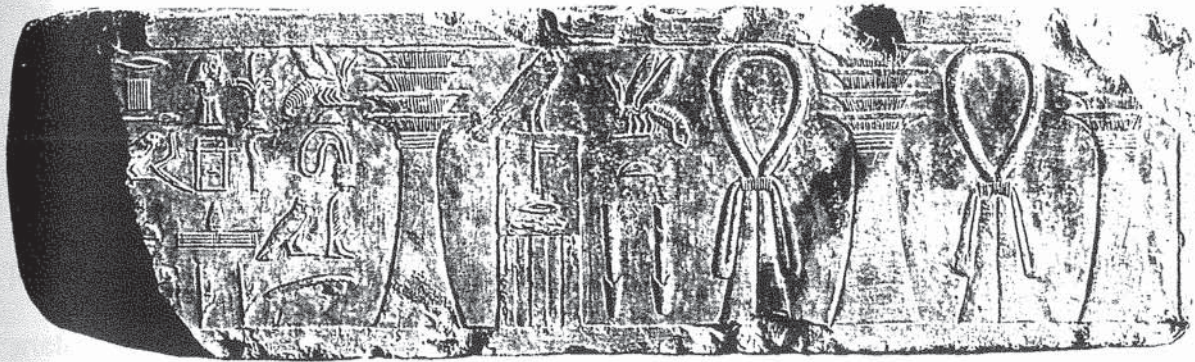


Fig. 2 The text of the base of the statue of Djoser including the titles of Imhotep [Clayton p. 33].

Familiarity with Lower and Upper Egypt

According to the architecture of the Step Pyramid, Imhotep was aware of the structures of buildings in Lower and Upper Egypt [Edwards pp. 64-66]. About Joseph there is a small note of his going out over all the land of Egypt [Genesis 41:46].

Construction phases of the Step Pyramid

Nowadays Imhotep is best known as an architect of the Step Pyramid [Edwards p. 53], [Kemp p. 106]. The Step Pyramid of Saqqara has been constructed in several phases (Figure 3) [Edwards pp. 56-58]. Explanation for several phases would be availability of the labour work done by the people to get corn from the state at the time of the famine. The change of the design would be an idea of the new organiser, Joseph, who would have got the form of the Step Pyramid from the memories of Mesopotamian temples. The list of the phases include comparison with the phases of the famine of the Genesis:

Phases of the Step Pyramid [Edwards pp. 55-58]	Phases in Figure 3	Phases of the famine [Genesis 47:18-26]
Mastaba and its enlargement	(1), (2), (3)	Before the famine
Entire different design was adopted: Four-stepped Pyramid	(4)	New architect: Joseph? Start of labour work after money and cattle had sold for the corn (3rd or 4th)
Mortuary Temple	not in Fig. 3	Labour work of the 5th year?
Extension of Pyramid towards north and west	extension of (4), (5)	Labour work of the 6th year?
Extension to the final size (6 steps) and the final layer	(5')	Labour work of the 7th year?

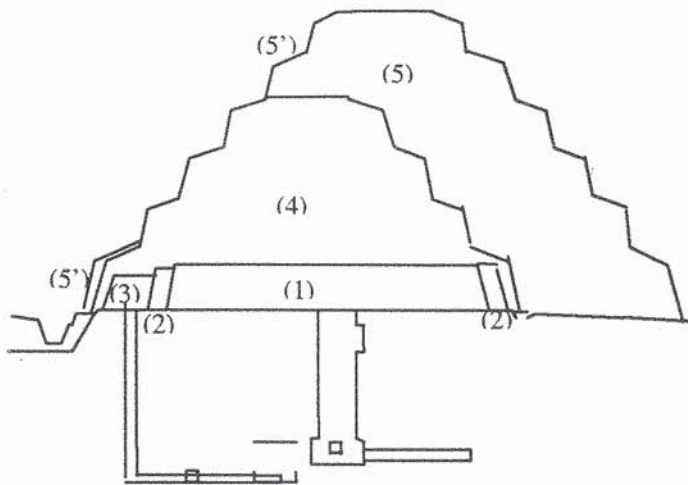


Fig. 3 Phases of the construction of the Step Pyramid, drawn by the figure of Edwards [Edwards, Figure 6].

Personal characteristics

From Egypt there are found hundreds of statuettes of Imhotep from the 22nd Dynasty to the end of the Late Period [Hurry p. 101]. Although dated about 2000 years after his time, these figures could give some assumption about the outlook of Imhotep. One statuette is in Figure 4. About the outlook of Joseph the Genesis tells: "And Joseph was a goodly person, and well favoured." [Genesis 39:6].



Figure 4 Statuette of Imhotep from the Late Period, [Clayton p.36].

Imhotep has been known as a wise man:
 "Imhotep enjoyed the reputation of being 'one of the greatest of Egyptian sages' (ref. E.A. Budge, Short History of Egypt); his fame for wisdom made so deep an impression on his countrymen that it endured as a national tradition for many centuries." [Hurry pp. 16-20]; and

"he (Imhotep) achieved fame as a great official, and it was as a great official, with the inevitable attribute of being 'wise', that he was remembered." [Kemp p. 106].

Also Joseph was mentioned as a wise man by the King: "there is none so discreet and wise as thou art" [Genesis 41:39].

Imhotep has been mentioned as an author of a wisdom book [Kemp p. 106], although no parts of it has been found. A trace of teaching of Joseph can be found from a Psalm: "He (king of Egypt) made him lord of his house, and ruler of all his substance: To bind his princes at his pleasure; and teach his senators wisdom." [Psalm 105:21-22].

Versatility of the talents of Imhotep is wide. His skills in the arts of making different artefacts has been already mentioned in the time of Djoser, see Paragraph "Titles of Imhotep and Joseph". He is said to be an architect, astronomer, constructor, physician, scribe, sculptor, priest [Hurry]. Joseph had also success in various areas: "that what he (Joseph) did, the Lord made it to prosper" [Genesis 39:3, 23].

Personal sensitivity

Imhotep seems to be a sensitive person: "he was a man of high and unsullied character, with a wide outlook of life, as well as a tender heart towards suffering humanity." [Hurry p. 26]. Joseph did react as a sensitive man with his brothers [Genesis 43:30, 45:2]. That will tell us that both were talented men, because they are often also sensitive ones.

Death of Imhotep

Wildung have reconstructed text of the Royal Canon of Turin so that he has found evidences of the death of Imhotep at the time of King Huni (3rd Dynasty) [Wildung pp. 30-32]. The time from the start of reign of Djoser to the death of Huni, last king of the 3rd Dynasty, is 55 years according to Clayton [Clayton p. 30]. Manetho gave for the last six kings of the Dynasty a combined total of 157 regnal years. Current timing sets after Djoser only three kings and for them 36 years [Clayton p. 33].

Joseph was 30 years old at the start of his high position [Genesis 41:46] and he died at the age of 110 [Genesis 50:22, 26]. The difference is 80 years. If the 18th year of Djoser would have been at the end of the seven years' famine [Budge p. 121], then Joseph would be 30 years at 4th year of Djoser. The death of Huni should be more than 80 years after that. Nowadays the period from the 4th year of Djoser to the death of Huni is counted to be about 50 years, which is shorter than in the chronology of Manetho.

Tomb of Imhotep

Imhotep was a well known person and name long after his death. This would imply that his tomb could have been found from Egypt. It has been searched at least from Saqqara [Hurry pp. 27-28], with the result of not yet being found [Clayton p. 36]. Joseph was not buried in Egypt. As it is known from the history of Exodus, the body of Joseph has brought to the land of Israel [Exodus 13:19].

Only few notes of Imhotep from the Middle Kingdom

From the time of the Middle Kingdom there is practically no sources where Imhotep has been mentioned. In Wildung the only source from the Middle Kingdom is papyrus Westcar [Wildung pp. 17-18]. There is a story from the time of the Old Kingdom and its connection to Imhotep has been made by conclusion. The silence would be explained with the Joseph theory and the Exodus. The Egyptians would not like to remember that unpleasant part of their history.

Since the 18th Dynasty there are texts and statuettes about Imhotep [Wildung pp. 19-32]. Why did Imhotep regain his reputation during the New Kingdom? Then Imhotep is in the demigod stage and takes part of special rites. Egypt has gone through the time of Hyksos and maybe the fame of a wise "Egyptian" from the old good days has survived within the texts and history of the priests?

Ptah and Jahveh

Imhotep was "Son of Ptah" [Hurry], and Ptah was one of the creator gods of Egypt. Could Ptah of Memphis and Jahveh of Israel have been comparable gods, in an Egyptian way? Would it be useful to compare the characteristics of Ptah and Jahveh?

Conclusions

Although it has not survived much material from the times of the early Old Kingdom, it has been able to construct some picture about the history and characteristics of the person Imhotep. Several events in the history of Imhotep resemble those of Joseph. There are similar substances in their personal characteristics and skills. These similarities will not yet verify the hypothesis that Imhotep is the same person as Joseph. The question is strongly connected with the timing of the history of the Israelites. If it is possible to date the Israelites being in Egypt during the Old Kingdom, Imhotep would be a good candidate to be Joseph. Then some of the questions in the history of Imhotep would be solved by the background knowledge of Joseph. And the picture of Joseph would be more deeper with what is known about Imhotep.

The presenting of these thoughts is to encourage questions and conversation. More study and new insights would be needed in several ranges of the study of the Old Kingdom to confirm or to disprove the hypothesis.

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