

Bite Size Bible Study

Joseph Shaved #210

By Pastor Lee

Most of us are familiar with the story of the patriarch Joseph in Genesis 37 and 39–50. But how closely have we read it?

While still young, he has dreams that predict that he will be greater than his brothers and parents. His brothers discuss killing him but eventually sell him and make a little profit to compensate for their humiliation. The traders who buy him, bring him down to Egypt, where he becomes servant to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh's guard.

Potiphar's wife finds Joseph very attractive and attempts to seduce him. Because he rejects her, she accuses him of making advances and has her husband put him in prison. Potiphar is enraged but is between a "rock and a hard spot". If Joseph is guilty, he should be executed but if not, Potiphar should divorce his wife. {For more on this part of the story see Bite Size Bible Studies #93 and 94}

While in prison, Joseph interprets the dreams of two other prisoners, foretelling their future. Two years later Pharaoh begins to dream strange dreams, and Joseph is brought out of prison to interpret them.

*So Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and he was quickly brought from the dungeon. **When he had shaved and changed his clothes, he came before Pharaoh.***
Genesis 41:14 NIV

Did you ever wonder why he shaved? And what did he shave? Did the phrase even catch your attention?

Moreover, why does the text even bother to mention it?

Genesis is thought to have been written by Moses, who was intimately familiar with Egyptian practices and customs, knew why, and probably felt his readers would know the answer as well. But we don't.

Most people in the ancient near east did not shave, however, ancient Egyptians were clean shaven. From the time of the Old Kingdom (2686–2181 B.C.E.), the custom among Egyptian men was to shave their beard and mustache and wear a false goatee on special occasions. Foreigners could be distinguished from native Egyptians by the presence of full beards.

By shaving his beard, Joseph transforms himself from a foreigner to an Egyptian. This change foreshadows Joseph's acceptance at court, as well as the fact that later Joseph's brothers will fail to recognize him, taking him for an Egyptian.

Joseph probably shaved not only his beard and mustache, but also shaved his entire body. Joseph was taking on the shaved body of the priesthood.

In ancient Egypt, priests had to be physically pure before entering a temple. Indeed, the very word for the most common category of priest is "pure one". Texts found on doors and lintels of Egyptian temples forbade those who were not "pure" from entering.

In Egypt, being physically "pure" or "clean" included having the entire body shaved. Priests are easy to identify in Egyptian statues and bas-reliefs because they are the ones shown with shaved heads and beards. Part of being "clean" or "pure" was also being circumcised. Circumcision was common in ancient Egypt and was required for the priesthood.

Herodotus, in his History II:37 states:

They [Egyptian priests] are beyond measure religious, more than [those of] any other nation; and these are among their customs: ... They are especially careful to wear newly washed linen raiment. They practice circumcision for cleanliness' sake; for they set cleanliness above seemliness. Their priests shave the whole body every other day, that no lice or aught else that is foul may infest them in their service of the gods ... They may not eat fish.

They could not eat fish (which was seen as peasant food) or wear wool, because most animal products were viewed as unclean. Many priests took three or four baths a day in sacred pools to keep themselves pure.

Egypt was not the only culture to require this degree of purification for the priesthood. Even the Levites of ancient Israel had to be completely shaved in order to participate in the sacrificial service:

The Lord said to Moses: "Take the Levites from among all the Israelites and make them ceremonially clean. To purify them, do this: Sprinkle the water of cleansing on them; then have them shave their whole bodies and wash their clothes. And so they will purify themselves.
Numbers 8:5–7 NIV

If being shaven and circumcised was necessary before entering an Egyptian temple, then one would expect it to be necessary before entering the inner chambers of Pharaoh's palace. The Pharaoh was considered a god and his palace a temple. Pharaoh was primarily the god Horus, the all-powerful owner of the soil and its resources, responsible for the overflow of the Nile, the rising of the sun, as well as the birth of living beings and plants. He was also the physical son of the sun-god, Re, the state god of Egypt and the natural mediator between mankind and the gods.

Because of Egyptian culture, the Pharaoh's divine character made his palace a temple. Although it contained the normal qualities of an Egyptian home (living quarters, harem quarters, kitchen, bathrooms,

gardens) and the normal qualities of a state administrative center (offices, archives, treasuries, libraries), the palace was primarily the sanctuary for the god-king. It also contained a chapel and a cult platform for royal ceremonies.

Given that the cleanliness requirements for the priests to enter the temples, and that the Pharaoh's palace was considered a temple, it required the same cleanliness for anyone who would enter certain parts of the palace.

It seems probable, therefore, that like the priest entering the temple, Joseph entering the palace/temple, would have to have had his entire body shaved to enter the inner reaches of the palace where the king held court.

As for the requirement of circumcision, it was not a problem. Joseph had been circumcised when he was eight days old.

For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner—those who are not your offspring.
Genesis 17:12 NIV

By studying the Scriptures along with Historical and Archeological information, the Bible reveals more than meets the eye on an initial reading. Studying means digging deep into the meaning of the written word and gleaning wisdom for our day to day lives. There are many seemingly hidden treasures just waiting for the student who will take time to search for them.

Reference:
Article in Biblical Archeology Society
Why did Joseph Shave? by Lisbeth S. Fried

Cornerstone Community Church PO Box 654 Lemon Grove, CA 91945-0654 – www.cornerstonecommunityonline.org