

Exodus, Pharaoh who did not know Joseph

Exodus 1:8 says that a Pharaoh came to power in Egypt who did not know Joseph. How is this possible when the final part of Genesis says that Joseph was made second only to Pharaoh? How did the Israelites find themselves enslaved by Egypt?

Genesis 41:40-43 neatly summarizes the position that the Pharaoh of Egypt gave to Joseph:

“You shall be over my house, and according to your command all my people shall do homage; only in the throne I will be greater than you.’ Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt.’ Then Pharaoh took off his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph’s hand, and clothed him in garments of fine linen and put the gold necklace around his neck. He had him ride in his second chariot; and they proclaimed before him, ‘Bow the knee!’ And he set him over all the land of Egypt” (NASU).

With Joseph being made viceroy of Egypt and saving Egypt from the terrible famine, one would expect that some kind of record would have been made about him. We would assume that successive Pharaohs would have at least known about Joseph, but this does not seem to be the case in the opening verses of Exodus, where a new Pharaoh comes to power and the Israelites in Egypt are enslaved:

“Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, ‘Behold, the people of the sons of Israel are more and mightier than we. Come, let us deal wisely with them, or else they will multiply and in the event of war, they will also join themselves to those who hate us, and fight against us and depart from the land’” (Exodus 1:8-10, NASU).

There are a variety of views as to why a Pharaoh came to power “who did not know about Joseph” (NIV). A proper view of this can elude many interpreters who are not equipped with an historical understanding of the Scriptures, which can generally be nursed by employing good commentaries. The *ArtScroll Chumash*, commonly used in today’s Messianic community, indicates that “Either it was literally a new king, or an existing monarch with ‘new’ policies, who found it convenient to ‘ignore’ Joseph’s monumental contributions to the country (*Sotah* 11a).”¹ While this gives us an important clue, and is indeed very possible, there are some more specific things that we need to consider.

Nahum Sarna indicates that “The most reasonable explanation for the change in fortune lies in the policies adopted by the pharaohs of the Nineteenth Dynasty (ca. 1306-1200 B.C.E.), and especially by Ramses II (ca. 1290-1224 B.C.E.), who shifted Egypt’s administrative and strategic center of gravity to the eastern Delta of the Nile.”² He gives a further clue on his commentary for vs. 9-10 as to why the Egyptians may have been fearful of the Ancient Hebrews:

“The eastern Delta of the Nile was vulnerable to penetration from Asia. In the middle of the eighteenth century B.C.E. it had been infiltrated by the Hyksos, an Egyptian term meaning ‘rulers of foreign lands.’ The Hyksos were a conglomeration of ethnic tribes among whom Semites predominated. They gradually took over Lower Egypt and ruled it until their expulsion in the second half of the sixteenth century B.C.E.”³

When we consider some of these factors in our reading of Exodus 1, what is most likely to have happened is that the Ancient Israelites found themselves embroiled in a political conflict beyond their control. This would have

¹ Nosson Scherman, ed., et. al., *The ArtScroll Chumash, Stone Edition*, 5th ed. (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 2000), 293.

² Nahum M. Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 4.

³ *Ibid.*, 5.

been the general time that Jacob and his family migrated into Egypt to avoid the famine, if we accept the prophecy that Israel would be in Egypt four hundred years (Genesis 15:13). This would have occurred at about the same time of the Hyksos invasion of Egypt, who later took over Northern Egypt where the Israelites lived. The Egyptians, not making any distinctions between the Hyksos and the Hebrews—both being Semitic peoples, coupled with the possibility of a new dynasty coming to power, would have easily enslaved them as they took back control of their land.

A new Pharaoh of Egypt from a new dynasty could have easily not known of Joseph because the Israelites settled in Goshen, in the Nile Delta region of Lower Egypt, and as Pharaoh he would have been from Upper Egypt or Southern Egypt, moving back into previously conquered territories. Wanting to rebuild an empire that had been lost, the Israelites having multiplied would make a convenient workforce. Politically it would have been easy to enslave them, because as Semites they would remind many Egyptians of the Hyksos invasion.