

Who were the Egyptians in the Bible?

The Egyptians were an ancient people who dwelled along the fertile banks of the Nile River in Africa. Their history spans 3,000 years. The Egyptians made remarkable strides in architecture, governance, science, and art. They created a centralized monarchy, a pantheon of gods, and a hieroglyph writing system. Beyond their historical and cultural significance, the Egyptians are prominently featured in Scripture.

Egyptian civilization began around 3100 BC with the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt under Narmer (or Menes), the first pharaoh. Since then, Egypt has experienced periods of prosperity and decline, but its influence in the ancient world was vast. In Egyptian society, the pharaoh was at the “top.” He was believed to be a mediator between the gods and humanity. The Egyptians believed in an afterlife and had elaborate burial practices, including mummification and the construction of tombs filled with treasures and texts to guide the deceased in the afterlife.

Egypt was a dominating power in the ancient Near East. The Egyptians engaged in trade, diplomacy, and wars with neighboring countries. The Egyptians are mentioned numerous times in the Bible, both a place of refuge and bondage. People fled to Egypt during times of famine. Genesis 12:10 says, “There was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe.” For Abram, Egypt provided temporary relief.

Joseph, the son of Jacob, was sold into slavery by his brothers and ended up in Egypt. However, Joseph rose to power in Egypt and became the pharaoh’s right-hand man. Joseph interpreted pharaoh’s prophetic dreams, which contained a warning about an upcoming famine. Joseph oversaw the distribution of resources in the time leading up to and

including the famine, and “All the earth came to Egypt to Joseph to buy grain, because the famine was severe over all the earth” (Genesis 41:57, ESV). Egypt was a place of survival and sustenance.

In the New Testament, Joseph and Mary escape to Egypt with the newborn Jesus after learning about King Herod’s plan to massacre male children in the region of Bethlehem. Matthew 2:13-14 recounts, “An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, ‘Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about the search for the child, to destroy him.’ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt” (NRSV). Joseph and Mary’s escape to Egypt and eventual return fulfills the prophecy in Hosea 11:1: “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son” (ESV).

Egypt was a place of refuge at times but also a land of oppression at other times. The Egyptians enslaved the Israelites in the centuries after Jacob’s son Joseph died. According to Exodus 1:11, the Egyptians “set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens. They built for Pharaoh store cities, Pithom and Raamses” (ESV). An extended period of suffering was followed by an exodus, led by Moses, who confronted the pharaoh with God’s demand: “Let my people go, that they may serve me” (Exodus 9:1, ESV).

The plagues in Exodus 7-12 were God’s judgment against Egypt and a display of His glory. In Exodus 14, God parts the Red Sea for Moses and the Israelites to escape pharaoh’s army. These events are commemorated during Passover, a Jewish feast inaugurated in Egypt.

Later, the prophet Isaiah warned Israel about turning to Egypt for military alliances

instead of trusting God's sovereignty: "Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help, who rely on horses, who trust in the multitude of their chariots and the great strength of their horsemen but do not look to the Holy One of Israel or seek help from the Lord" (Isaiah 31:1).

King Solomon purchased horses from Egypt (1 Kings 10:28-29), and he married an Egyptian princess (1 Kings 9:16). Egypt later attacked Jerusalem during the reign of Solomon's son Rehoboam and made away with many treasures from the palace and temple (2 Chronicles 12). From then on, Egypt served as an ally or as an enemy to Israel—mostly as an enemy. The Judean king Josiah was killed in battle with the Egyptians (2 Kings 23:29). Jeremiah predicted that Egypt would be conquered by Babylon but that Egypt's fall would not be permanent (Jeremiah 46:25-26).

Egypt was a powerful ancient civilization integral to God's redemptive plan. In the future millennial kingdom, God promises that Egypt will be blessed: "In that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the heart of Egypt. . . . So the Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians, and in that day they will acknowledge the Lord. They will worship with sacrifices and grain offerings; they will make vows to the Lord and keep them. . . . The Lord Almighty will bless them, saying, 'Blessed be Egypt my people'" (Isaiah 19:19, 21, 25a).