

Joseph was Imhotep



From RationalWiki

The idea that the **Joseph of the Old Testament was Imhotep** is a mixture of the usual "Biblical history" pseudo-historical distortion, with a bit of crossover appeal to the lunatic fringe "Alternative" Egyptology nuts. It's a kind of anti-intellectual, anti-historical supermarket, with something for everyone.

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Claims

In a nutshell, the claim is very simple. Basically, Imhotep, the Vizier of the 3rd Dynasty Pharaoh,^[1] Djoser, was Joseph of the Old Testament, who was sold into slavery in Egypt by his good, god-fearing Abrahamic family.^[2] Thus Joseph wasn't "just another Asiatic" forgotten by Egyptian history, but the single greatest influence on the entire civilization.

Names and etymology

All sites promoting this theory shy away from tackling the vagaries of the Egyptian language in a decisive manner:

*"Imhotep was revered as the son of PTAH, a creator-god of Memphis, the patron god of craftsmen; equated by the Greeks with Hephaestus. The cult of Imhotep reached its zenith in Greco-Roman times when sick people slept in his temples with the hope that the 'god' would reveal remedies to them in dreams - much like Edgar Cayce's legendary abilities. The 'TA' in Ptah means earth. Take the P and H and add them to (D)Jose(r) and you have Joseph - **which** doesn't mean anything, but it is interesting just the same."* —Betty Rhodes^[3]

One of many articles on

Religion



The main players

- Christianity
- Islam
- Hinduism
- Buddhism
- Judaism
- Sikhism

Critics

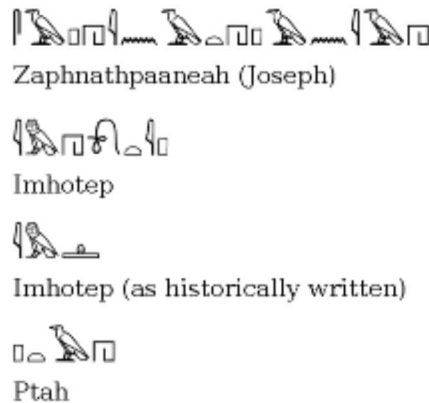
- Atheism
- Antitheism
- Secularism
- Humanism

Supporting actors

- Charity
- Hindutva
- Infidel
- Militant atheism
- Pious fraud
- Reincarnation
- Tithe

v - t - e (<http://rationalwiki.org/w/index.php?title=Template:Religion&action=edit>)

Rhodes here readily admits that her etymological gymnastics is pointless, so why include it, except to plant suggestion in the gullible, perhaps? Furthermore, it should be emphasised the the etymology of the name Ptah is in fact far from certain, and there is no scholarly consensus on the issue (besides everyone agreeing that no one knows for certain. Rhodes has also evidently played with a "Write Your Name in Hieroglyphs" program, and come up with some not-very-interesting results, reproduced here with Jshesh. Note the only differences are colouring and sizing for readability, and the orientation of all texts to read LTR, in keeping with standard transcription practice.



The issues with this shall be dealt with line by line.

Zaphanathpaaneah

Here Rhodes is engaging in a baseless experiment with serious misunderstanding about Egyptian writing. She has simply spelt out the **English translation** of the name into monoliteral hieroglyphs, in the way Egyptian souvenir sellers do, right down to the impossibly stupid mistake of *writing the p and h and t and h as separate symbols*. Why not use the Hebrew? Hebrew is, after all, a distant cousin of Egyptian, and they share much closer phonetic values than English and Egyptian.^[4] This gives (very dubiously) "sfntp3nh" - at the very least, roughly *eight* sounds would be expected for the eight Hebrew letters (tz-ph-n-th-p-'-n-kh) - possibly more or fewer, but certainly not *fifteen*!

Quite what this exercise shows isn't very clear, besides it being possible to render the **English translation** name in hieroglyphs, which of course is no more of a "coincidence" than it being possible to transliterate the name of Hu Jintao into the Latin alphabet^[5]. Still, it'd be fun yet pointless, if it wasn't totally wrong.

The rendering of "H" in Egyptian is famously complicated, due to phonetic values used in Egyptian. English (and thus the English transliteration of Zaphanathpaaneah) has only one "H" sound (as in "house" or "horse"). Egyptian has four "H Sounds" - H as in "horse", an emphatically pronounced "H", a more guttural "KH" sound, equivalent to the "loch" in Scottish pronunciation, and its softer cousin, equivalent to the "ich" in German.^[6] These are treated as entirely separate values in Egyptian, and have different monoliteral signs. This again makes us ask why Rhodes didn't attempt this interesting but meaningless exercise between Hebrew and Egyptian.

Finally, perhaps a rather minor point, but no hieroglyphs that could represent the name "Zaphanathpaaneah" (or the Septuagint's "Psonthomphanech") have ever been found. Never. Not once.

Imhotep

The rendition given here by Rhodes is incorrect technically as well as historically. This rendition was never used to write the name of Imhotep, the reason being it is wrong. The lasso sign, 4th from left (V4 in Gardiner classification) has the phonetic value "w3", not "O".^[7]

The version she gives below (noted in the reproduction as "as historically written") is indeed correct. Note how is Rhodes two fictional renderings of Imhotep and Zaphanathpaaneah look vaguely similar, in a contracted sort of way, but in the case of historical example doesn't hold up.

Ptah

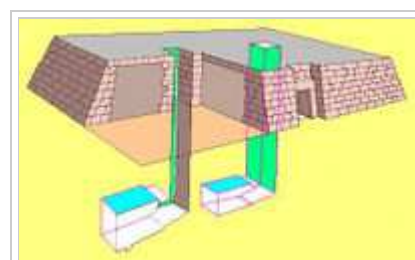
This rendering is spelt incorrectly. The "A" sound in Ptah is a modern corruption. Ptah's name in hieroglyphs was rendered "*pth*", and is academically vocalised as "Pteh" or "Peteh", as Egyptian are not yet fully understood in their Pre-Coptic forms (All pre-Coptic Egyptian writing systems omitted vowels, in the same manner modern Arabic and Hebrew systems do).^[8]

As far as etymology is concerned, Rhodes is totally correct in one of her statements... It "doesn't mean anything, but it's interesting, just the same."





Grain silos of Imhotep

The site "Joseph and Israel in Egypt" shows aerial photographs of the Step Pyramid complex at Saqqara, including what the author claims to be grain silos.^[9]

They are, in fact, nothing of the sort. They are mastaba tombs, large, rectangular structures containing a tomb chapel, offering area and false door for the deceased, and a concealed burial chamber at the bottom of a shaft accessed only from above to keep it secure. Actual Egyptian storage facilities were long, narrow magazines. Comparison photos can be seen below:



Cutaway diagram of typical mastaba

Mastaba	Storage Magazine/Silo
	
Aerial view of mastabas at Saqqara called "silos" J&IIE	Aerial view of actual storage magazines, at the Ramesseum
	
Mastabas from ground view	Ramesseum storage magazines from ground view

From the aerial view, it is possible that some people may be mistaken, and taken in by this deceit by

misrepresentation. A ground view quickly makes it clear to all that the two structures are utterly different. The only reason for using a highly zoomed (and thus unclear) aerial picture is to mislead.

Wyatt also makes mention of the granaries/silos of Imhotep-Joseph^[10] but focuses on different structures, also in Saqqara, and not far from the Step Pyramid of Djoser, some very large pits dug in the living rock. However, these are entirely unrelated to the pyramid complex, and date to a completely different time period, to the 26th Dynasty (7th century BCE) onward.^{[11][12]} The author apparently has little concept of envisaging an archaeological site in 4 dimensions (in 3 dimensions of space and also in the 4th dimension, time), which is fundamental to understanding its development. Wyatt writes:

" Surrounding the Step Pyramid, the first ever built, is a very beautiful and elaborate wall containing 13 false entrances and one real. At the main entrance on the east wall at the southern end, one enters a long hall of 40 columns -- 20 on each side. Each column is connected to the main wall by a perpendicular wall, forming small rooms between each column. As you exit this colonnade and walk straight ahead, you come to a series of very large pits which extend deep into the earth. " — Mary Nell Wyatt^[13]

To Wyatt, the fact these features can now be seen at the same time and close together **must** mean they were built at the same time and for a shared purpose. In fact, the time between the construction of the hypostyle hall and the shaft tombs they mention is greater than the time between the death of Julius Caesar and the present day.^[14]

She then disputes the consensus amongst Egyptologists that these structures were tombs, stating that there are:

- **Not Underground** - Well, they are holes in the ground. By most sane definitions, that is subterranean. If by this the author means to say they are open to the air, well they are now, because they have been excavated. They were originally covered.^[15]
- **Incredibly Large** - To be honest, saying something can't be a tomb because it's too large and/or over the top in respect to anything from Pharaonic Egypt is like trying to argue the sky is green.^[16] It should also be noted that these shaft tombs contained, and were intended for, multiple burials.^[17]

Saqqara was a "city"

Wyatt quote mines the useful but outdated "Scepter of Egypt"(sic) by William Hayes, to portray Saqqara as a living, working city. However, Hayes' quote of a "veritable city in itself" is taken seriously out of context, for Hayes continues:

"These remarkable buildings, excavated and restored by the Egyptian Government's expedition at Sakkareh are replicas in stone of the light wood, reed and brick structures of earlier times"
—William Hayes^[18]

What Hayes don't make entirely clear, is that the enclosure around the step pyramid (but not its surrounding mastabas, beyond its enclosure wall) is filled with what appear to be buildings to the casual observer. All of these buildings are "fake". They are dummy structures, solid stone with no internal spaces (except the occasional space the depth of the open door, built for religious purposes to serve as a court for the Pharaoh to celebrate his jubilees in the afterlife. Whilst some magazines would have existed to supply the temple cults of the deceased Pharaoh, this place wasn't a real palace or city.^[19] The real treasury and granaries during the time of Djoser were in Memphis proper, a site mostly buried under millennia of accumulated Nile alluvium,^[20] and which, temples aside, was built from mud-brick, a material which has the unfortunate tendency to dissolve in water.

Chronology

Most of the sites dealing with the Imhotep = Joseph story quietly sidestep the chronological conundrum that their claim dives headlong into. Only Wyatt deals with it, and in a very interesting way.

Conventional Chronology ^[21]	Ark Disc. Chronology ^[22]	Event
n/a	c.2348	Biblical flood
c.3200-3000 [^]	c.1915 [^]	Abraham brings wisdom to Egypt [^]
c.2660	c.1715	Reign of Djoser, with Imhotep as Vizier

- All dates are BCE
- [^] Quite what is meant by "bringing wisdom" is unclear. However, the two main breakthroughs of Egyptian culture post-unification, but prior to the end of the Old Kingdom are generally considered to be the development of writing and administration, and development of monumental architecture. Since the latter occurred under Imhotep, whom Wyatt associates with Joseph and a later period, then reason suggests that the "wisdom" referred to is writing. Thus, to provide more anchor points with conventional chronology, I have assumed this to be the case, and used the generally accepted date range for the development of the first hieroglyphs for comparison to Wyatt's dates. Note, of course, that conventional chronology does not ascribe the development of Egyptian writing to Abraham.^[23]

Whilst there is some debate amongst Egyptologists concerning dating events in Egyptian History, the vast majority of this discourse takes place within the overall framework of the appropriately named Conventional Chronology, mainly differing over more exact dates within the overall margins of error for each period, which vary from ~100 years for the early Old Kingdom, to 20-30 years in the Middle Kingdom, 10-20 years in the New Kingdom, before becoming insignificant (individual days or months) in the Late Period.^[24]

Many sources have been used from both archaeological and textual research to reach this chronology, including King Lists (such as the Palermo Stone, Turin Canon, and dear old Manetho. Reign lengths can also be confirmed (or corrected) by archaeological evidence. For example, blocks from a temple of Akhenaten, with his cartouche, have been found broken up and used as fill in material in the 2nd pylon of the Precinct of Amun-Ra at Karnak, constructed by Horemheb. Therefore, we know for certain that Horemheb reigned **after** Akhenaten. Similarly, the distribution of regnal years on artefacts from well attested reigns can confirm or correct our knowledge from King Lists about a reign length. If we have many artefacts up to year 10 of Pharaoh X, but nothing beyond that, it would confirm a reign length of at least 10 years, even in Turin Canon reports a 5 year reign.

Dating can also be tied in to certain reigns by events in which Egyptian civilization interacts with others, for example we know absolutely certain that 18th Dynasty Pharaoh Amunhotep III was the contemporary of Hittite King Tushratta, as they exchanged diplomatic correspondence which has survived, and that Ramesses II was contemporary with Muwatalli II due to inscriptions both left claiming triumph over the other at Kadesh^[25], as well as a copy of the subsequent peace treaty, a copy of which is preserved at Karnak temple.

Furthermore, we are able to use records of astronomical observations from the time, which record the regnal date that they were taken, using these to anchor Egyptian regnal chronology to an absolute astronomical date. One such observation the Egyptians recorded is the helical rising of Sirius (*spdt* to the Egyptians). When



Model shrines in the pyramid enclosure of Djoser at Saqqara. Note, where the middle structure is partially ruined, the solid stone core can clearly be seen, showing the building to be a "fake", or model. Also, just visible in the image, the blank wall behind the "doorway" on the left hand structure can just be seen.

a location is recorded (or can be ascertained from other details) it can pin a regnal date to an absolute date within a window of 4 years.

Finally, any organic material recovered from an archaeological context can be dated by scientific analysis, such as C14 (Radiocarbon) dating. C14 dating is not widely used in Egyptology as it's margin of error is typically 40 years for items less than 10,000 years old, which makes it less accurate than historical models for most periods of Egyptian history.^[26]

In conclusion to the chronological issues, whilst Egyptology may not be able to give an exact absolute date for every event in Egyptian history, it's overall framework is much more established and certain than Bible literalism and "alternative" theories present, and certainly has a far better basis than the literalist-based chronology presented by Wyatt, which is simply implausible when weighed against almost all the above methods of dating.

Comparison list

Emmet Sweeny provides a handy comparison list between Imhotep and Joseph, noting apparent similarities in their lives. A reproduction is given below, with point by point notes. It should also be noted that most of these "points" for Imhotep come from the Famine Stela, which Sweeny has misinterpreted in several significant ways, which are addressed in the Famine Stela section of this page. The rebuttals here shall deal with archaeology rather than textual references, as far as possible.

Joseph	Imhotep	Commentary
Second in command under Pharaoh	Second in command under Pharaoh Djoser	Imhotep was indeed Vizier. No evidence for a "Joseph" ever being Vizier.
Lived to be 110 years of age	Lived to be 110 years of age	No evidence for a long life for Imhotep. Administrators often served under multiple Pharaohs, ^[27] no evidence of Imhotep outliving Djoser, who reigned less than 30 years ^[28] , nor of him serving Djoser's predecessor. No evidence for existence of Joseph.
Great architect and builder	Great architect and builder	Imhotep certainly was, universally recognised. No architectural evidence at all of Joseph's building works, nor of his existence.
Stored up corn during 7 yrs. of plenty	Stored up corn during 7 yrs. of plenty	Sole evidence for Joseph existence or storage of grain is Bible. Taxing in grain and storage of said grain was fundamental to Egyptian administration, and pre-dates Imhotep ^[29] .
Saw seven years of famine - fed people	Saw seven years of famine - fed people	This is a stereotyped Egyptian virtue that was said of any good official. "I fed the hungry and clothed the naked. I ferried the boatless..." Totally standard text. Joseph, no evidence.
Interpreter of dreams	Interpreter of dreams	Common for wise men all over the ancient world. Nothing exciting. Even a scribe in workmen's town of Deir el Medina (hardly a courtier) had a dream dictionary in his personal library, to interpret dreams. ^[30]
Built pyramids and palaces	Built pyramids and palaces	Imhotep. Yes, see Step Pyramid and Heb Sed court. Joseph, see....??? hmmm
Overseer of Physicians	Was a Physician	Imhotep. Unknown during life, but had a reputation for it once deified. Likely therefore, but hardly conclusive. Wisdom was often associated with medical knowledge in Egypt. Joseph, oh yes. The Bible says so.
Instituted income tax of 20%	Instituted income tax of 20%	No. Egypt already had income tax, and it was variable rate dependent on the location and method of irrigation for the land.
Married into the Priesthood of "On"	Married into the Priesthood of "On"	Imhotep <i>was</i> a Priest of Heliopolis. He didn't marry into it. No evidence for Joseph outside the Bible.
Knowledge of Astrology	Knowledge of Astrology	There is no evidence of astrology in the western sense being used in Egypt, though astronomy was practised and had very strong religious and theological significance, but there is no evidence of it taking on the role it has in the west, of portraying future events. As such Imhotep could not be an "astrologer", though as a Priest of Heliopolis he possibly was trained in <i>astronomy</i> , which was an important aspect of the Heliopolitan priesthood.
Coat of many breadths/colours	---	Nothing to do with Imhotep, though being a trusted courtier he likely had some very nice clothes indeed. Joseph's was upgraded by Technicolor.
Became an educated man	A poet and educated medical writer	Joseph, as always. Imhotep obviously was able and educated, but no conclusive evidence he wrote the texts ascribed to him, though it's possible he did, but they are now lost.

Overseer of public works	Overseer of public works	Imhotep is confirmed in this role. Nothing but Biblical myth for Joseph.
Legendary history	Legendary history	One thing both do share in common
Name means to add, increase, to join or gather together	Name means the one who comes in peace	Yes. And?
One of 12 siblings	One of 12 siblings	No solid evidence for either.

Famine Stela

Sweeny and Wyatt both make use of the so-called "Famine Stela" on Sahel Island, Aswan, in creating a "biography" of Imhotep, with Wyatt making specific reference to it and Sweeny using it as the basis for many of the supposed similarities between the lives of Joseph and Imhotep, the archaeological for which (i.e. none) is discussed above.

However, some details about both the stela and it's contents are omitted or distorted in their use of this source.

"In the inscription, the pharaoh is troubled about a famine and asks Imhotep who the god of the Nile is, so he can approach him about the drought: "... I asked him who was the Chamberlain,...Imhotep, the son of Ptah... What is the birthplace of the Nile? Who is the god there? Who is the god?" Imhotep answers: "I need the guidance of Him who presides over the fowling net,..." " —Mary Nell Wyatt^[31]

Wyatt has misquoted the translation, and edited it in minor but vitally important ways, which completely change the meaning of the text.

I directed my heart to turn to the past,

*I consulted one of the staff of the Ibis,
The Chief Lector-Preist **of** Imhotep,
Son of Ptah South of His Wall;*

"In which place is Hapy born?"^[32]

- The Famine Stela, Trans. Miriam Lichtheim^[33]

The important part is bolded here. The Pharaoh, Djoser,^[34] is *not* addressing Imhotep, his Vizier. He is addressing the priest of the cult of *god* Imhotep. The priest is the one who provides the information, **not** Imhotep.^[35] The supposed similarities between Imhotep and Joseph, such as the establishment of a tax to prevent famine are all based on this incorrect translation.

It should be noted that early translations of this text were misread in this way, and a few Egyptologists do still dispute this, but most scholarly opinion is now in accordance with the interpretation laid out by Lichtheim.

Conclusions



The Famine Stela, Sahel Island, Aswan

None of the points advanced by the various sites promoting this idea hold water. And whilst they all fail on their individual weaknesses, they argument should not be allowed to bury two key facts:

- **chronology.** Even if the mythical figure of Jospheh, and the historical one of Imhotep are both ascribed certain similar characteristics, the fact that Imhotep lived c.2660BCE, and the first solely monotheistic references to Yahweh are not encountered historically until the 6th to 8th centuries BCE. Anything else may be an amusing debate, but is really sideshow to this single historical fact.
- **Lost in Translation.** These similarities are all based on a misinterpretation of a single text, the Famine Stela. By a minor but crucial error in reading, the whole weight of the reading of the text has been shifted from a priest belonging to the cult of Imhotep, to Imhotep himself.

Online examples

- s8int.com (<http://www.s8int.com/joseph.html>)
- Mary Nell Wyatt's article on Ark Discovery (<http://www.arkdiscovery.com/joseph.htm>)
- Betty Rhodes: The Red Thread (<http://the-red-thread.net/joseph-imhotep.html>)
- Joseph and Israel in Egypt (<http://josephandisraelinegypt.wordpress.com/>)

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- **Lichtheim, M (1980)**, *Ancient Egyptian Literature Vol. III: The Late Period*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles
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- **Wilkinson, T (2007)**, *Lives of the Ancient Egyptians*, Thames & Hudson, London

Footnotes

1. ↑ Wilkinson, 2003
2. ↑ Genesis 38:27
3. ↑ Emphasis added - see <http://the-red-thread.net/joseph-imhotep.html>
4. ↑ Gardiner, 1953
5. ↑ Just like that, see? Wow...
6. ↑ Gardiner, 1953
7. ↑ Gardiner, 1953
8. ↑ Gardiner, 1953
9. ↑ <http://josephandisraelinegypt.wordpress.com/2009/05/03/the-step-pyramid-complex-at-saqqara-egypt-note-grain-silos/>
10. ↑ <http://www.arkdiscovery.com/joseph.htm>
11. ↑ FSF/ Leiden University Mission to Saqqara (<http://www.saqqara.nl/saqqara/timeline>)
12. ↑ [[http://www.saqqara.nl/saqqara/tomb-architecture](http://www.saqqara.nl/saqqara/tomb-architecture/late-period) /late-period FSF/Leiden University Mission to Saqqara
13. ↑ <http://www.arkdiscovery.com/joseph.htm>
14. ↑ Based on standard chronology: Shaw, 2000
15. ↑ Field tour lecture, Saqqara, 2008. Did I really take the trouble to reference this point?
16. ↑ Great Pyramid. I rest my case
17. ↑ FSF/Leiden University Mission to Saqqara (<http://www.saqqara.nl/saqqara/tomb-architecture/late-period>)
18. ↑ Hayes, 1953, pp. 60
19. ↑ Wilkinson, 2000
20. ↑ Baines and Malek, 1980
21. ↑ Shaw, 2000
22. ↑ <http://www.arkdiscovery.com/joseph.htm>
23. ↑ Every sensible person knows that Alan Gardiner stole a DeLorean and time travelled back to the

- Naqada III period, wearing an Ibis mask, and carrying a copy of *Egyptian Grammar*.
24. ↑ Kitchen, 1991
 25. ↑ <bias>The Hittites were full of libul deceipts</bias>
 26. ↑ Kitchen, 1991
 27. ↑ Wilkinson, 2007
 28. ↑ Shaw, 2000
 29. ↑ Shaw, 2000
 30. ↑ P. BM10683 aka P. Chester Beatty 3
 31. ↑ <http://www.arkdiscovery.com/joseph.htm>
 32. ↑ Hapy is the one of gods of the Nile, one responsible for the bounty from the inundation, not the inundation itself, which is controlled by Khnum, which becomes relevant (and clear) later in the text
 33. ↑ Lichtheim, 1980
 34. ↑ <religious propaganda>Life, Prosperity and Health to the Perfect God, King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Son of Ra, Netjerkhet!</religious propaganda>
 35. ↑ Lichtheim, 1980

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