

Walk like an Egyptian: Egyptian Names in the Joseph Story

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In this week's *parasha* we read of Joseph's meteoric rise from incarcerated slave to viceroy of Egypt. It is the story of a Hebrew slave's successful entry into the upper echelons of Egyptian society. Joseph's transformation is not only material (new clothing, jewelry, and power), but he is also transformed culturally. In chapter 41, verse 45, Pharaoh gives Joseph an Egyptian name and arranges his marriage to the daughter of a prominent Egyptian religious leader. "*Pharaoh called Joseph the name Zaphenath-Paneah and gave him Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, to be his wife. And Joseph went throughout the land of Egypt.*"

Potiphera (and the related name *Potiphar*) is a well attested form of name in Egyptian - *Pa-di-XX* - meaning 'Gift of XX' (where XX is the name of a deity). The name *Pa-di-PRe* has been found on an ancient Stela dating to the 21st Egyptian dynasty (Stela Cairo JE 65444, c. 1000 BCE.) Therefore we can say with some confidence that *Potiphera* is the Egyptian name, *Pa-di-PRe*, meaning "gift of Re" (the sun god).



Stela of Potiphar

The name **Asenath** is usually understood by most scholars as coming from the Egyptian (*N*)es-*Neith*, meaning "She belongs to (the goddess) Neith." This type of name is well known - there are 139 examples of the pattern "She (or He) belongs to XX" i.e. (*N*)es-*Amun*; (*N*)es-*Horus*, etc. This particular formula however, "She belongs to Neith," has not been found. Why Potiphera, the High-Priest of the sun-god Ra, would name a daughter "she belongs to Neith" a goddess unrelated to the religious cult of On (Heliopolis) is questionable and other etymologies are possible.¹

¹ Such as *Ius-en-at* ("she belongs to you.") See, K.A. Kitchen, *The Joseph Narrative*, in, He Swore an Oath: Biblical Themes from Genesis, pp. 77-89.

Joseph's name, *Zaphenath-Paneah*, has been the subject of much speculation. The Targumim translate the name to mean “*the revealer of hidden things*.” Understanding *Zaphenath* as being related to the Hebrew צפון (hidden). Most modern scholars, however, understand the name to be a Hebrew rendering of a well-known Egyptian form *Dje - XX- ef' Ankb* meaning “*the god XX says, he will live*.” Many examples of this name exist but always including the name of a specific deity, i.e. “*The god (Amun, Mut, Isis, Horus, Ptah, etc) says he shall live*.” Our form, *Za pbe nath-Pa neah*, would accordingly be rendered, *Dje-Pa-Net-eF-'Ankb*, meaning “*the god says he shall live*” using the Egyptian generic word for god “*Net(r)*” but not specifying any particular deity.

Because this type of name has never been found without the inclusion of a particular deity (and other questions) some scholars have proposed alternative etymologies for *Zaphenath-Paneah*.² However, it is entirely fitting that Joseph, a Hebrew, who consistently attributes his successes to God, be given a name that specifically avoided invoking a deity of the Egyptian pantheon.

Joseph tells Pharaoh in verse 14: בְּלִעְדֵּי אֱלֹהִים, יַעֲנֶה אֶת-שְׁלוֹם פְּרַעֲוֹה “*Not I but, God will answer to Pharaoh's wellbeing*.” Pharaoh, in kind, says in verse 38: הֲנִמְצָא כָּזֶה--אִישׁ, אֲשֶׁר רִיחַ אֱלֹהִים בּוֹ “*Could we find another like him, a man in whom is the spirit of God?*” And in the next verse, הוֹדִיעַ אֱלֹהִים אוֹתָהּ אֶת-כָּל-, “*God has made all this known to you, there is none as discerning and wise as you*.” Clearly, Pharaoh was being careful to credit Joseph's abilities to the Hebrew God (*Elohim*). Therefore, it is entirely appropriate that Joseph's Egyptian name should be *Za pbe nath-Pa neah* - only the meaning should not be rendered: “*the god says he shall live*” but rather *God says he shall live*. Here the Egyptian generic word for god *Net(r)* is used in place of the Hebrew *Elohim*.³

Joseph, despite being completely acculturated to the Egyptian world, and surrounded everywhere by the Egyptian pantheon, kept faithful to the one God of Israel - because of this he is given a name free of any Egyptian pagan meaning.

The Joseph story teaches us that it is possible to successfully assimilate to one's surrounding culture without having to give up one's religion. Whether we find ourselves in Ancient Egypt, the Seleucid Empire, or the United States of America, Jews have risen to the upper echelons of the prevailing culture. It is important that we, like Joseph, remember that it not our assimilation that has caused us to succeed, but God who is responsible for our successes. An apt message for this, shabbat Hanukkah - “*Not by might, nor by power, but only by My spirit, saith the LORD of hosts*.”

² The most plausible of which is that צפנת is a metathesis of צתנה - *zatanap* -meaning “*who is called*” ; i.e. Joseph “*who is called iP'Ankb*” (One who Lives). See - R Englebach, *The Egyptian Name of Joseph*, JEA, 10 (1924) and K.A. Kitchen, “*The Joseph Narrative*.”

³ See, Alan Schulman, *On the Egyptian name Joseph: a New Approach*, Studien zur Altgyptischen Kultur (1975) and Cyrus Gordon, *The International God “Elohim/Ntr”*, Hebrew Studies, Volume 23 (1982)