



CHAPTER 1 | THE CURTAIN RISES ON EGYPT

INTRODUCTION

We'll begin our study of the history of the world in Egypt. Almost everybody knows something about Egypt—think of sand and camels, pyramids and mummies, with the Nile River flowing through it. We all know a little about Egypt, but the more you learn about it, the more amazing it is. Civilization emerged in Egypt about 5,000 years ago, around 3,000 B.C., and thrived for over 2500 years: easily one of the longest lasting civilizations in history.

Egypt can seem a little dry because centuries roll past without too many changes. The Egyptians liked it that way; they were conservative and traditional folk. However, Egypt is a great place to start learning about subjects like geography, government, economics, literature, mythology, and religion, because we know just enough about Ancient Egypt to begin to understand how a civilization works, but not so much as to make our heads spin!

The word “civilization” comes from the Roman word for city: *civitas*. When you think of a city, you can imagine people doing different jobs in buildings and streets instead of in a lonely wilderness. When a group of people knows how to build many cities and they all live together in the same way, we usually call that a civilization. Such people usually speak the same language, share the same ideas and beliefs, eat the same sorts of food, and celebrate the same holidays. In the *Penguin Historical Atlas of Ancient Civilizations*, author John Haywood gives four classification lists to categorize the levels of complexity (and advancement) of any given society.¹

1. **Bands:** These small societies are typical among hunter-gatherers. They often number under 100 members and are organized in extended families. Bands have no formal leadership and migrate from place to place. From an outsider's perspective, members of the band would seem to share the same level of wealth and social status.
2. **Segmented Societies or Tribes:** These are larger than bands—they might number a few thousand people. This is a society of smaller groups connected to one another as a greater whole, usually by kinship ties. Tribes are most often associated with settled farming peoples. Though their leadership is more formal than bands, leaders lack force or power outside of their own small group.
3. **Chieftdoms:** Chieftdoms are bigger than bands or tribes, usually falling between 5,000 and 20,000 members. In chieftdoms, we begin to see social status as a marker that tells where a person falls in relation to a superior family line. Chiefs have real force and power even outside their immediate community, and they use it to control food surpluses. They also have enough power to decide who does what jobs in the chieftdom (and thus can accomplish building projects), and they can use the extra food resources that they control to support their followers and craftsmen, who often live with chiefs.
4. **States or Civilizations:** These are the most complex (and advanced) forms of society, and are typically larger than chieftdoms. In states or civilizations, we see much specialization of roles and settlement of members in cities. Social status is not defined by family lineage, but it is defined by what jobs people do—in other words, it is defined by social classes. Leaders have full and forceful powers, either based on an army or their people's worldview beliefs, and leaders can issue laws. Subjects pay taxes to support the leader's armies, craftsmen, and administrators who are needed to run this social system.

Interestingly, Haywood also writes that it is important to avoid using our own value judgments when

1. Information or quotes attributed to Haywood are taken from pages 8-10 of *The Penguin Historical Atlas of Ancient Civilizations*, by John Haywood (Penguin Group, 2005).



assessing a society's level of advancement because value judgments vary according to the standards one applies, and can lead to unhelpful (or damaging) assessments of the merits of societies. For instance, suppose you decide that a "band" is less important or less meaningful than a "chiefdom" because a band is less likely to leave behind objects showing beautiful craftsmanship?

Secular historians do not necessarily describe or evaluate human communities as God does, but Heywood's approach gives us a taste of the methods these historians use to make sense of social history, and they do prove some valuable or interesting ways of thinking about ancient civilizations.

In addition to his comments about different levels of advancement in a society, Haywood also makes interesting observations about what has and has not affected the development of human civilizations. For instance, he writes that "Mentally fully modern humans probably evolved between 50,000 and 40,000 years ago, when art, body ornaments and other material evidence of symbolic thought begin to appear in the archaeological record" (10). This view that humans evolved mentally (and physically) is, of course, widely accepted by secular scholars, though many Christians believe it contradict biblical accounts of man's beginnings.

He believes that "technological innovation does not seem to have been a critical factor in the emergence of civilization" (10), and that "The immense scientific and technological accomplishments of the present day are not . . . evidence that human mental capacities have gone on evolving" (10).

Haywood is noting here two factors that he can't explain without admitting the "divine spark" of God-breathed revelation. There is no plausible reason (especially since he rejects the possibility that it was caused by technological innovation) why mankind should have existed for tens of thousands of years without mental development such that they could begin to form a civilization, and then, in well under 7,000 years (of recorded history) advanced to present-day status with no appreciable difference in mental capacities!

Scriptures such as Genesis 4:20-21, Exodus 31:1-11, and Ephesians 3:17 all provide examples of the idea that the "spark" of advancement (in the physical and spiritual realms) is a direct, specific, and purposeful gift from God. However, quite aside from Haywood, most modern scholars talk of human beings existing for tens of thousands of years on the earth before some kind of "spark" resulted in rapid improvement and, following relatively quickly, civilization. For instance, on page 24 of *The Pharaohs of Ancient Egypt*, author Elizabeth Payne suggests that the Nile forced men to think.

It is an interesting question to ponder one way and another: "If you do not (or do) allow the existence of the Creator God of the Bible, what different explanations might you give for rapid advances in civilization?"



THE GEOGRAPHY OF EGYPT

Egypt is a place full of geographical contrasts that affected her entire history, so geography matters more than usual in understanding Ancient Egypt! It isn't hard to find Egypt, even on a globe—all you have to do is look for the big continents (Africa and Asia), and then find the place where the seas almost come together. The Mediterranean Sea comes within just a few miles of Red Sea at the Suez Canal. If you can find that spot on a globe and then look for the big river, you've found the Nile. Find the Nile and you've found Egypt!

There's more to geography than just finding places on a map, though. Geography deals with how people respond to the lands that they live in or wander through. You can see that for yourself as you trace the green ribbon of the Nile through the African desert. Remember to trace it upwards with your finger, though, because the Nile flows north or "up" on a map instead of south or "down" as most rivers do. The Nile is also unusual in another way: at over 4,000 miles, it is one of the longest rivers in the world.

That steady supply of river water made it possible for people to live on a long narrow strip of land surrounded by deserts, and the Nile's yearly floods provided rich soil that didn't become exhausted by continuous farming. Nowadays, we have fertilizer and understand the need for crop rotation. The Egyptians didn't, but that didn't matter. They just waited for their river to rise. This week we will concentrate on the relationship between the river and humans – especially for life in the villages and cities.

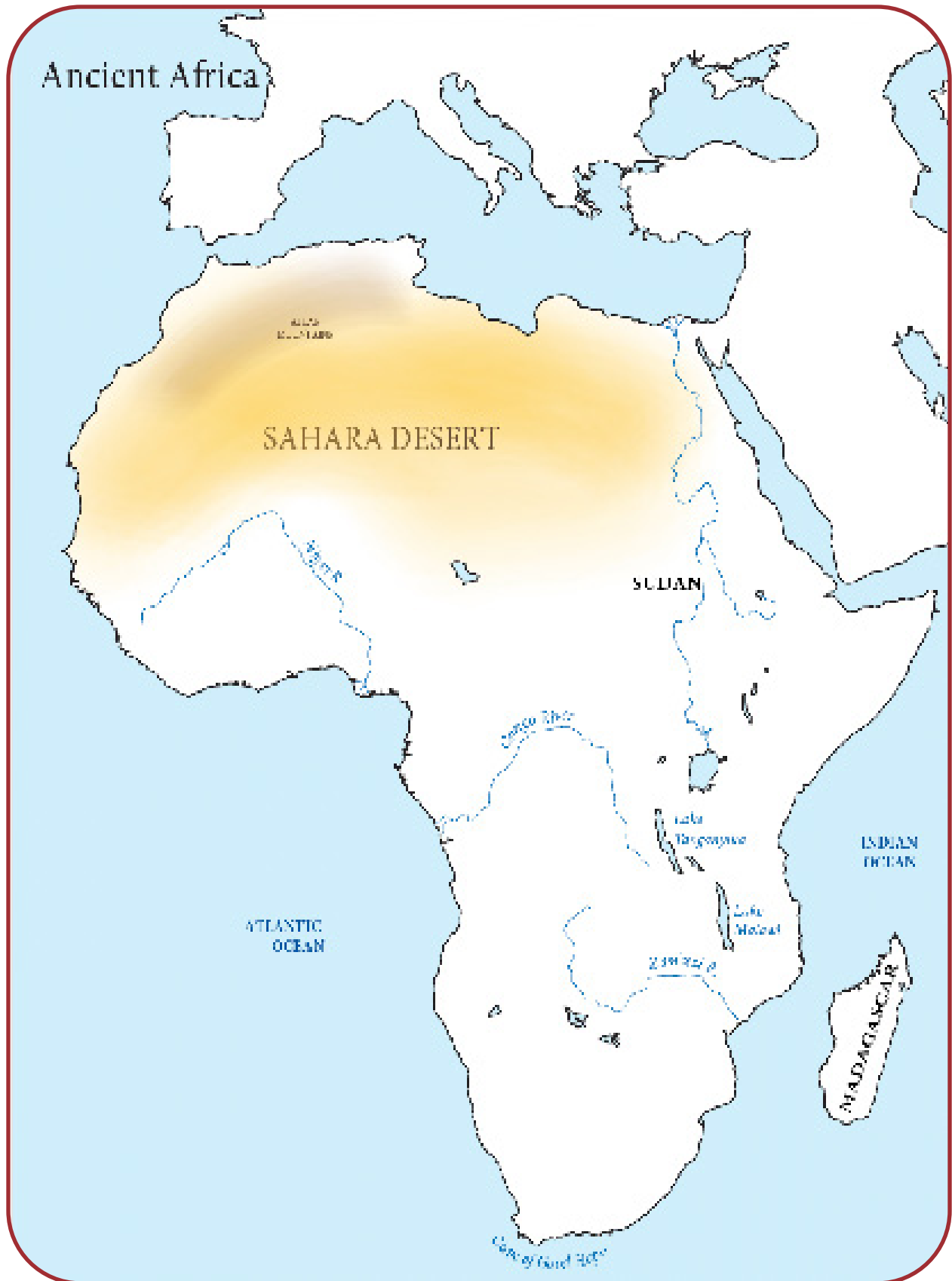
Egypt has been called "the gift of the Nile" because the river was so important to how people lived. Remember we mentioned that Egypt is full of geographical contrasts? One of the most importance of these is the difference between the desert surrounding Egypt and the land along the Nile River in Egypt. You see, the Nile didn't only give Egyptians drinking water in the midst of a burning desert! It also gave them something just as important in the long run—mud. Mud made Egypt great.

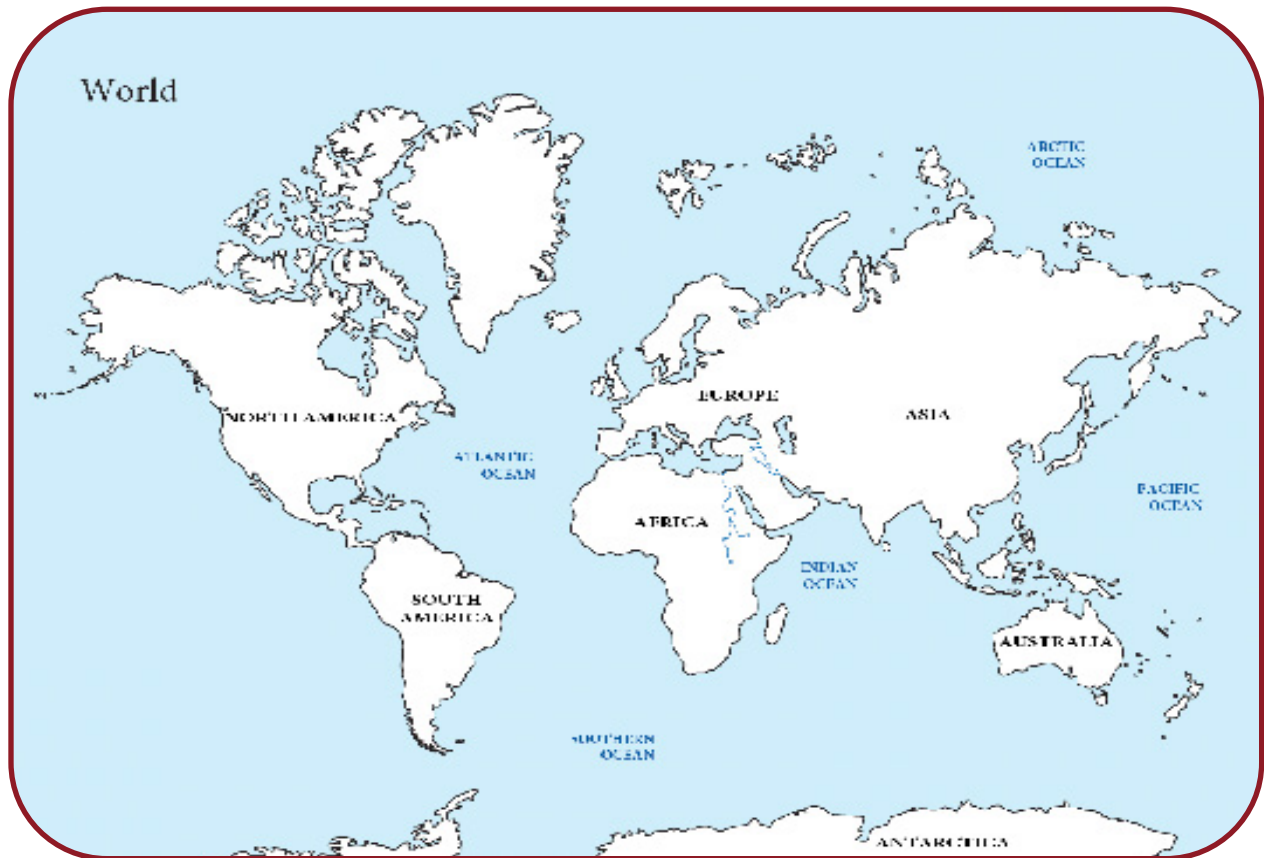
Each year in summer, heavy rains soaked the high mountains of Ethiopia, far to the south. You've probably seen water rushing downhill during a rainstorm. The water is brown and rushes quickly, sometimes making big puddles when it gets trapped. In the same way, muddy water from Ethiopia flooded into the Blue Nile, which carried the silt – silt is a word for the dirt in muddy water – all the way downstream.

Eventually, most of this Ethiopian dirt wound up being left in the great Nile Delta, which bulges out into the Mediterranean Sea. But every year the flood left hundreds of miles of mud all along the way. That mud was fantastic fertilizer, which caused the crops—and the population—to grow. In one sense, the mighty civilization of Egypt started with mud. For this reason, the Egyptians spoke of "Red Land," which was desert land, and "Black Land," which was fertile soil watered by the Nile's annual flood.

While the ancient Egyptians could predict what time of the year the Nile would flood, they could not predict for certain whether or not it would flood every year. However, as a rule, the floods came annually, and once farmers added Nile water to black soil under a hot African sun, they could grow plenty of food.

The Nile would flood during the Egyptian's spring, which lasted from July to September. A clever irrigation system (invented, they say, by Menes, the first king who united Egypt) directed some water to fields and stored other parts of it in manmade lakes. Once irrigation efforts were organized and people regularly coordinated their efforts, their stable civilization grew and grew.







The farming season lasted from mid-November to mid-March; in March and April the harvest was gathered. Egyptians and Israelites alike grew wheat and barley for grain. Fruits included dates, grapes, figs, and melons. They had plenty of vegetables like lettuce, beans, onions, and cucumbers. They also raised dairy and beef cattle, goats, ducks, geese, donkeys, and some people kept bees for honey. They also had fish and fowl to supplement their diets.

Here's a point worth noting: when the Israelites left Egypt, they wouldn't have been prepared for the challenge of farming a land that wasn't re-fertilized every rainy season. In fact, a steady food supply was one important thing that the Israelites gave up when they left Egypt. The children of Abraham may have been slaves in the land of the pyramids, but they could grow their own gardens, and those gardens were rich! By contrast, the crops in Canaan would have worn out the soil after a few years of farming. If farmers let the land rest and don't try to grow anything on it for a year, it regains strength and can grow better plants with more food. Allowing the land to rest is called crop rotation.

Instead of flooding the promised land and covering it with mud every year, God gave His people His perfect law. In Leviticus 25:4, God commanded His people to let the land rest every seventh year. This biblical crop rotation provided wisdom the Israelites never would have learned along the fertile banks of the Nile.

In between growing and flooding season, farmers prepared new irrigation ditches. During this “between” season, and also during flood season, farmers without employment would work for the pharaoh on building projects to fulfill labor taxes. Forced labor was necessary because the flooding Nile ruined buildings, irrigation ditches, and roads each year, so repairs were needed annually. On larger projects, criminals and prisoners of war were used as well.

Where there's plenty of food, there will be plenty of people—and plenty of people can cause plenty of trouble! If you look around the world at ancient cities, what you'll find are city walls—because one village was often the village next door's worst enemy. Fortunately, Egypt had something better than walls—it had a desert—and not just any desert, but the Sahara Desert.

The Sahara is big, and it's still growing: today it is bigger than the United States, and it stretches all the way across Africa, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea. It wasn't as large 5,000 years ago, but it was big enough to keep out invaders from the east and west. Egypt also had mountains, which not only helped to keep the country relatively isolated and protected, but also provided stone for building and mines of precious minerals. Conscripted citizens also mined ore as part of their tax burden, so gems and metals poured from them into the hands of Egypt's great artisans. Thanks to their geographical protections, Ancient Egyptians also had enough safety to make money by trading the work of their craftsman with each other and also with other countries. At the same time, thanks to the Nile River, Egyptians had enough raw materials of their own to be self-sufficient and independent of other nations when they chose.

Egypt thus developed into one strong, unified state with its own distinctive culture. With a stable food supply from the river and protection from most enemies because of its mountains and deserts, the early Egyptians grew fat and happy and had lots of kids. Along the river, villages grew into cities, and cities became kingdoms. When one kingdom finally became strong enough to rule the entire valley, the Egyptians had a safe, stable, rich country in which to build their civilization.



Throughout history, we will see civilization after civilization rise—or fall—and we will keep pointing out three reasons for the existence of a given strong culture or a strong civilization: a stable food supply, a strong central government, and safety from outside enemies. Where these three are present, civilizations tend to rise. When they aren't, civilizations fall.

SPECIALIZATION

We will be learning more about the government of Egypt next week. For now, it is worth noting how many special skills the royal family needed. The book of Genesis tells how Joseph met Pharaoh's chief baker and butler while he was in jail. There were countless other experts working for the royal family. They had architects, scribes, accountants, and musicians—not to mention their own embalmers, whose job it was to make dead people into mummies. We take jobs like butlers and bakers for granted, but when your country can have some people doing special jobs, instead of farming or hunting, that is called specialization.

Egypt's rich food supply and stable government resulted in free time and more and more special jobs. After farmers harvested their food, they worked on other specialized projects because people who are well-fed have enough time to develop special skills in different areas. When people barely make enough to live on, they don't have many chances to specialize. Everybody is just trying to survive!

When people can specialize, though, they often make new tools and skills that make it easier to grow more food and keep their enemies at bay. This leads to more people, more trade, and more specialization. In Ancient Egypt, there were potters, jewelers, weavers, perfumers, miners, sailors, shoemakers, butchers, scribes, priests, architects, and kings—although, in Egypt, kings were called pharaohs. Because they had time to specialize and perfect their work, many of the Egyptians' lasting monuments are built in stone, and Egypt's surviving jewelry is so stylish that we are still copying it thousands of years later!

Egypt also developed scientifically. With so much of their lives depending on the annual flooding of the Nile, they paid attention to the passing of the year. They realized there are just over 365 days in a year, although they had their own way of counting them. Their calendar had 12 months that were each 30 days long. At the end of the year, they tacked on five extra days.

Their enormous building projects—like the pyramids—required ways of measuring areas, volumes, distances, weights, and so on. They had to invent much of what you're probably learning in math from scratch—adding, subtracting, multiplying, dividing, fractions, and angles. There was no one to teach them these ideas, they just had to use trial and error until they figured out the right answers.

Imagine trying to build a house when you think that $2 + 2 = 5$, or if you thought that $15 - 5 = 12$. All your measurements would be wrong, and your house would keep falling down on top of your head! Would you rather keep $\frac{1}{2}$ or $\frac{1}{4}$ of the food that you grow? Knowing fractions makes a big difference at harvest time!

Egyptian doctors understood a great deal about the human body in general, and their experts usually devoted themselves to one medical specialty or another. The Egyptians doctors kept records—something that was unheard of in any other culture at the time. Some of their medical practices were mistaken—for instance, they thought it was a good idea to spread dung on wounds to help them heal!—but for their time, they were medically advanced.



TRANSPORTATION, COMMUNICATION, TRADE

The Nile River was not only a source of food and water, but also a home to useful animals or plants, a play-and-work space for children and adults, and a highway for transportation. For example, papyrus is a tall reedy plant that grew abundantly in the Nile. Egyptians used it for many things: paper, mats, shoes, boats, and even rude huts. To sail on the Nile, the Egyptian built themselves boats out of bundles of papyrus reeds.

Imagine yourself paddling downstream in such a boat, past riverbanks crawling with crocodiles, as hippos snort in the shallows and an ibis stands on the shore. Flocks of ducks and geese explode out of the marshes as lions roar in the reeds by the river. Hungry hyenas follow the lions, hoping for scraps. Not only animals, but fishermen, herdsman, farmers, washerwomen, and plenty of children, would all have spent their days in, on, or around the water. The Nile was full of so much life, and yet all of it was surrounded on either side by hundreds of miles of near-lifeless desert. No wonder the Egyptians loved their great river!

Among its many other contributions to the Ancient Egyptian civilization, the Nile provided relatively easy transportation to a relatively low-technology society. The winds that usually blew from north to south filled sails to push boats *down* on the map, and the current that flowed down the river (which is *up* on the map) made the Nile an ideal highway. Rowers and steersmen were still be needed, of course, but in each direction there was either a wind or a current to help out.

This ease of transportation was important in many ways. For example, trade goods and taxes could move freely, and troops could move quickly by boat if one part of the kingdom fell under attack. Heavy stone blocks, workers, artisans and precious metals could move more easily to pyramid building sites by water than by land (you will learn more about this next week), and architects could travel to inspect blocks before they come downstream.

The Nile also transported swift communication—messages to and from pharaoh to administrate the long skinny kingdom, but also direct the Egyptian army's movements from afar, making it easier to keep Egypt unified under the pharaoh's central authority. Quick transportation on the Nile also helped Egyptians to trade more easily and often with other peoples of the eastern Mediterranean, the African interior, and of the Sinai peninsula, all of which added to Egypt's wealth and grandeur.

DAILY LIFE

If you could hop in a time machine and visit Egypt today, you'd know you were in a hot country because of the Egyptians houses and clothing. Their houses were made of mud bricks baked hard in the hot sun, and were generally slung low, not tall. Small windows set high in the walls helped heat to escape. Thick walls provided insulation and a bit of coolness. A poor home might consist of a single dark room with a flat roof above for work and sleep in the cool breezes. Wealthier homes were larger and prettier, of course, often built around courtyards with garden pools. Rich Egyptians had private bathrooms, but they did not use pillows—instead, a wooden headrest kept their heads in the correct position and allowed cooler air to circulate around their necks. Can you imagine sleeping on a curved piece of wood?

Wood in Egypt was a relatively rare and precious commodity, but the Egyptians did use it for furniture. Again, the poor had relatively little: a few stools, boxes for storage, and woven mats for beds. The wealthy would add low tables, beds of carved and decorated wood, chairs, and chests.



To help combat the heat, Egyptians wore thin, form-fitting, light-colored clothing made of linen. Linen is cool, breathable, and comfortable, and it grew well in Egypt. Men wore short kilts called *shentis*; women wore narrow sheath dresses called *kalasiris*. There were head coverings to protect from heat, and Egyptians could use shawls, capes, and robes in various styles (often pleated) for fashion or to protect against the desert chill at night. Slaves and children (especially children under the age of six) wore little to nothing!

The Egyptians also used heavy cosmetics such as kohl (a kind of black eye paint) to protect their eyes from the glare of the sun. Their hair might be worn long or short, kept in elaborate braids or dreadlocks, or removed entirely to keep cool and clean. Shaved hair might be made into elaborate wigs for parties.

Many wealthy Egyptians had pleasure barges for parties or cruising. Hunting hippopotamuses and crocodiles were major sports. Men in the upper classes might hunt lions in the desert as well. Fishing was a popular pastime, and Egyptians famously kept cats in their households.

MOSES

As you learn about Egypt, remember that God called Israel out of Egypt. We'll be moving out of this fertile valley to a wilderness, where the only food is manna and the water miraculously springs out of the rocks. Moses is the perfect person to help you imagine day-to-life in ancient Egypt, whether you're learning about slaves or royalty—because he was both!

Try to look at Egypt through Moses's eyes. What did he see when he looked out his window? What did he eat or do for fun? Although he was a prince who grew up in Pharaoh's house, the Bible says of Moses that "He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward" (Hebrews 11:26 ESV). "Reproach" means blame or criticism. Although the Egyptians had food and gold and power, they did not worship God, and Moses chose God instead of everything that Egypt had to offer. He chose the blame and criticism attached to being counted among God's people as actually greater wealth than that of Egypt because he knew that the reward of Heaven is much greater than the reward of even the greatest Egyptian pharaoh.

CONCLUSION

The more you learn, the more you'll see how it all goes together. The rains in Ethiopia fertilize the fields in Egypt where the Israelites groaned as slaves for centuries until God called Moses away from the palace to eventually lead them to freedom. We will follow threads like government and slavery and sacrifice and freedom from the start of human history to its end—for a purpose. In the end, it all comes back to the glory of God. Jesus left the glories of Heaven to be born in a stable here on Earth. He paid a higher price than Moses did to deliver us from a slavery worse than anything the Egyptians had to offer.