



Egyptian culture used symbols in monuments, artwork, writing, and ceremony. Here Egyptian symbols are conveyed through art.

Kerry Muhlestein

# Egypt in the Bible

AN INTERVIEW WITH KERRY MUHLESTEIN

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***RE:** Running a computer search of the scriptures for the word “Egypt” brings up an amazing number of hits, starting in the Torah and continuing all the way through the New Testament. Why does Egypt get so much recognition in the Bible?*

**Muhlestein:** There are at least two major reasons. First, Egypt in many ways is the birthplace of Israel as a nation. Certainly the covenant was established with Abraham, but once we get to Joseph, the story moves to Egypt. If the Exodus is the birthplace of Israel as a nation, then Egypt is the womb. Much of Israelite culture was affected by Egypt. Unfortunately, we often look elsewhere to understand ancient Israelite culture. We know so much about Egyptian culture, but we often do not look there for understanding the culture of the ancient world.

Second, Egypt is Israel’s closest major neighbor. There are many small kingdoms around Israel, but Egypt is the superpower next door. For thousands of years they have had interactions that have shaped the political events and sometimes hardships in Israel.

**RE:** *It appears that Egypt is almost always just under the surface of the story, particularly in the Old Testament period. You do not find as many explicit references as you do for Babylon or Assyria, but Egypt is always there.*

**Muhlestein:** I agree, especially in the winding-up scenes of the kingdom of Israel and of Judah from Isaiah's day through Jeremiah's day. Egypt was continually mentioned in the prophecies because it was influencing what Israel and Judah were doing in regard to Assyria and Babylon, but those references are under the surface. You have to dig to see what is going on.

**RE:** *Egypt had great stability and continuity, unlike the other superpowers that arose. Assyria rose and then disappeared in the wake of a new superpower. Egypt had more continuity, probably because it was isolated with deserts on both sides. How long is Egyptian history from the time we have records?*

**Muhlestein:** Around 3,500 years from the time of Egyptian culture as we know it develops until the introduction of Islam—that is really the end of Egyptian culture. China is the only other place in the world that comes close to rivaling that kind of stability and cultural continuity. Geographically Egypt was protected, and agriculturally they were blessed with the most stable and regular agricultural system the world had ever had.

**RE:** *It seems interesting that we have Moses in Egypt, Joseph in Egypt, Jeremiah in Egypt, and Jesus in Egypt. What do you make of that?*

**Muhlestein:** Egypt in the Bible plays a dual role. It is both a place of protection and refuge and also a place of wickedness and oppression. Abraham went to Egypt partially because of its agricultural stability, when things were difficult in Canaan. Often when there was a famine, the people went to Egypt. The same thing occurred in Joseph's day. He was sold into Egypt, but when his brothers experienced famine, they went to Egypt. Similarly when Jeroboam needed political refuge from Solomon, he fled to Egypt. Jeremiah was an unwilling refugee in Egypt. When Israel and Judah were being destroyed, groups fled to Egypt for refuge. And so it was a safe haven, yet it was also a place where Israel was oppressed. Egypt is a great symbol of bondage in biblical literature. In prophetic literature, Egypt symbolizes the powers of the world that will ultimately fail us.

**RE:** *When many readers think of Egypt, they visualize the modern political map with Cairo as the epicenter. When we read the word "Egypt," what should be our mental map?*

**Muhlestein:** There are two different stories for Old and New Testament times. In the Old Testament, the political landscape of Egypt was largely what

we think of for modern Egypt, at least the geographic boundaries. For quite a while, there was a significant period of time when the southern portion—what they would call Kush or Nubia or Ethiopia—was considered part of Egypt. The Kushites or Nubians were the kings of Egypt. For instance, in the miraculous rescue of Hezekiah during the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem, the Egyptians, under the Kushites, played a role. Taharka, a general who later became the Pharaoh, led an army up into Israel, and that was in part how Judah found relief. There was a miracle involved, and the Egyptians might have been a part of that miracle. It is difficult to tell exactly what went on, but the Lord used this army to rescue Jerusalem. So at that time period, the Egyptians were being ruled from the south of Egypt, but the center for them in many ways was Memphis, which is not too far from modern-day Cairo. However, for most of the biblical time period, we focus on the northern delta area and places like Tanis.

When we get to the New Testament, it is a completely different story because Egypt had become a special province of Rome and was almost sacred, protected territory. It was just reaching that status at the time of the birth of the Savior because of the events between Antony and Cleopatra and so on; it had become a special place that the emperor protected and treated differently, and that is part of why it worked nicely as a refuge for Joseph and Mary because others were a little reluctant to go there.

**RE:** *The Nile River is so important to Egypt. Tell us about population centers. Did it always control where people built?*

**Muhlestein:** Everything about Egypt revolved around the Nile. In the Bible the Nile played a pivotal role in Moses' story. It is also their major mode of transportation. When you think of the wheel, you think of Mesopotamia. The wheel was not nearly as important in Egypt, because of the river. Furthermore, the land in Egypt is arable because of the flooding of the Nile. When you get one step beyond the flood zone, it is desert, and very inhospitable except for a few oases. Largely, the arable land is just along the Nile, and so, if there was a significant population center, it was close to the Nile though typically just a little ways away, because you do not want it to be completely flooded every year. For instance, one significant time period in Egyptian history is what we call the Hyksos period, where a group of people from the Syrian/Canaan area came down and controlled Egypt. And this is very likely the setting for the Joseph story. We cannot know for sure but it works chronologically and explains a lot in Joseph's story. Their center was a

town called Avaris, and it probably became a center because it was a large port on one of the great branches of the Delta—the first one you would come to as you came down from Israel in the Syria/Canaan area. It became a trading port. There were so many Canaanites that eventually they were able to take over the country. So the ability to have transportation on the Nile always affects politics and settlement in Egypt, and even interaction with Israelite history.

**RE:** *Tell us historically about where you think Sinai was, where Moses went with the Midianites, and where Jesus' family was when they brought him down to Egypt?*

**Muhlestein:** I really do not think we know. You can look at all the possible Exodus routes through the Red Sea or the Reed Sea, a marshy plain. I can find pros and cons to both of these arguments as various possible settings for Mount Sinai. I have not found a single conclusive argument for the route of the Exodus. I have not found one set of arguments for where Mount Sinai is or where the Midianites were that I have found to be completely convincing. They all have problems, and yet many of them are very plausible. I think we just do not know. I think of the traditional site, St. Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai, where many people will hike up and have spiritual experiences. It is as good a candidate as any. As I look at it, it helps me think of the wilderness the Israelites went through and how trying this experience must have been.

**RE:** *What about the site where Joseph and Mary went?*

**Muhlestein:** I have not done much with that. If you read all the accounts of what Jesus supposedly did as a child, he lived in about two hundred different places up and down the Nile and I think with those accounts, we have even less of an idea than anything about the Exodus because we really have no good evidence. All we know is that they went to Egypt and then they came back. The traditions that arise are late enough and disconnected enough from what someone possibly could have known that I think we are just making things up. However, I do not find it harmful to pick a place and try to picture that place. Again, if that makes the story of the Savior's flight to Egypt more real to you, then that is wonderful. As long as our testimony is not tied to a geographic location, I do not have a problem with that. But I approach all these things with a great deal of skepticism.

**RE:** *When many people think of the term "Holy Land," they think of Israel or the West Bank, but if we think of the term as referring to a land made holy by the righteous men and women—prophets and prophetesses and priests—who walked the land, would you consider Egypt part of the Holy Land?*

**Muhlestein:** Certainly. If we use that definition, some places are more holy than others. In my mind, Mount Sinai has to be one of the holiest places in all of world history. The events that took place there and the theophanies—the experiences with God—are as significant as any we will ever find. I wish we knew more about how Moses came to understand God and his role, because there are probably some wonderful places in Egypt proper, along the Nile Valley, that would be sacred places. I do not believe we can precisely date when the Exodus occurred, but there is a fairly good chance Tanis was the royal city at the time of Moses' birth. So maybe Tanis is a fairly holy site. If Joseph ever stayed with his father, Jacob/Israel, who was a prophet, in Goshen, then that would be a place where two incredible prophets were at one time. If he was really with the Hyksos, then Avaris was a place where Joseph had a lot of spiritual experiences. So if you are going to give it that definition, I think Egypt certainly has some wonderful significant places, but the problem is, for most of those, that we do not know where they are in Egypt.

**RE:** *So we have the Old Testament connections of Egypt. We have the New Testament connections of Egypt. Egypt seems to be playing a pivotal role. In the Restoration period, all of a sudden Joseph Smith in Kirtland comes across some documents that came from Egypt.*

**Muhlestein:** And in some ways it attests to the importance of that earlier period. Apparently, there were writings of Abraham and Joseph in Egypt. We will get up to the Restoration, but let's start earlier. Most likely, there are several possible scenarios for how those documents end up in Egypt, and I am in the middle of research on this right now. Even if it came earlier, most likely these writings proliferated when there were large Jewish settlements in Egypt. From the time of Jeremiah on, Egypt increasingly became a place of the Diaspora (the scattering of Israel). There were serious significant Jewish settlements. There were Jewish synagogues all throughout Egypt, and they built a couple of temples there. They were the third-largest ethnic group in Egypt. The Egyptians were first, the Hellenes or Greeks were second, and the Jews were third. They had a significant presence in Egypt, and they kept not only what we have as the biblical books of the prophets but other books including the Book of Abraham and the Book of Joseph. Then the turn of world events just before the Restoration opened up Egypt, and for a short while there was an incredible flow of texts and monuments and other goods from Egypt. Then, although it is still trickling today, the incredible flow of artifacts stopped. It was a short window that opened right when the Restoration was

in need of more doctrinal clarification and revelation from the Lord. And it was during that short window that these artifacts came out and were there with the mummies that some of the first bits of Egyptian documents made their way to Joseph Smith. And I do not think it is a coincidence that they ended up in Joseph Smith's hand just as the Church needed clarification on things like the Abrahamic covenant. It seems to me that the Lord moved spiritual treasures that Egypt had hidden from time, and they were brought to the Church right when it needed them. The Church already had a fascination with Egyptian things because the Book of Mormon was written in reformed Egyptian. America as a whole, the world as a whole, was interested in Egypt at this time period. So the Saints are not different in that way, but I think they had an added element in that they saw these religious ties coming through the reformed Egyptian, or at least a book written in Egyptian script. And then a few years later they found these papyri from Egypt, and they have the Book of Abraham, as well as the facsimiles. The facsimiles always fascinate students. They are the only canonized pictures that we have. I think they created in the early Church, and even today, an intense interest in Egypt.

We find the Lord moving on a large scale to create things that his kingdom needs at a given time, and Egypt has been a part of that more than once. We have talked about how that happened during the Restoration. I think it happened earlier in the history of Israel as well. That land, what we refer to as a "Holy Land," was almost always controlled by one large power or another. If it was not the Egyptians, it was the Hittites or eventually the Assyrians and so on. There is only a short period of time where it is not controlled by someone else. For instance, when a group we call the Sea People came in and eclipsed these empires and caused all sorts of problems. There may have been some other catastrophic events going on, but all of these superpowers withdrew into their own areas for a short time, and a power vacuum was created during the period of the judges. This is exactly when, as a kingdom, Israel was able to flourish: when Egypt was no longer controlling that area, and neither were the Hittites, Assyria, nor the Mitanni. They were all gone and Israel flourished as a kingdom, but only for short period of time. As Egypt and Assyria became powerful again, they both started to squish Israel and eventually eclipsed Israel, and Israel disappeared as a nation again. But Israel had been brought out of Egypt during a short time when the Lord, in one way or another, moved things about so that they could become the kingdom that they needed to become. When Israel ceased to be righteous and rejected his repeated calls

for repentance, events did not continue to turn in their favor, and they disappeared under these amazing powers that were around them.

*RE: People have talked about Egypt as a symbol. When they think of the courts of Egypt, they think of licentiousness, evil, wickedness. Why did Egypt get that reputation? All the other nations were very similar in the political, economic, and social way that they saw the world. I really cannot imagine that Egypt would be that different from all the others. Why does Egypt have that imagery?*

**Muhlestein:** I think it is because of the way it is used in the scriptures. If we were to look at what we know to be their culture, Egypt is probably a step above their surrounding neighbors. They were certainly brutal in warfare, engaged in all sorts of slave trade. Contrary to what has been popular opinion, we have been able to demonstrate very clearly that they engaged in human sacrifice on occasion and in certain rituals. Yet, even with these practices, they did not have the reputation that the Assyrian army had for ferociousness and brutality. I think the Old Testament prophets, because of the political role Egypt and Babylon play and the historical interactions they had with Israel, used them as symbols of bondage and sin. And it makes perfect sense considering Israel's relationship with them. That is where they were: in bondage—and terrible bondage. Probably one of the reasons that Egypt has this reputation is the horrible decree that "we will kill all the male children." That is as bad as it gets. So they have come to symbolize this bondage. Some of this symbolic journey is Israel journeying to their promised land, making the covenant on the way and turning their back on bondage. Symbolically, that has come to represent turning your back on sin and licentiousness, as you said. It would be the same thing with Babylon later: leave Babylon and turn your back on licentiousness, as they came from Babylon back to the Holy Land. These two countries have that reputation. The other way Egypt got the reputation is from political circumstances that we talked about when Assyria, and then Babylon, moved into Israel or had already controlled Israel, but their presence wasn't as strong. When this happened, Israel wanted to rebel, and often they were encouraged by Egypt, which was competing with these superpowers, and Israel was caught in between. But the Lord tells them, do not do this; rely on me and my power. If they rely on Egypt instead, Egypt becomes the prototypical symbol of relying on the power of man rather than the power of God and will be called the broken reed and those kinds of things. Because of those historical events, Egypt became a good symbol for sin, bondage, and all sorts of terrible oppressive things.

*RE: Ultimately, if you look at the Old Testament period and then the New Testament period and the Restoration, why is it important for us to know about Egypt in order to appreciate the Old and New Testament and Restoration periods?*

**Muhlestein:** There are several reasons, but let me mention at least two. One is, as I mentioned earlier, I think we underestimate how much we can understand culturally about Israel by understanding Egyptian culture. As an example, the Israelites started building the Tabernacle very soon after leaving Egypt, and they were not a group of people who did not know how to build and then randomly started to build. The Lord chooses skilled artisans. How did they become skilled artisans? They were taught by the Egyptians how to build things. For example, the Ark of the Covenant—an ark that is carried around on staves built by their best craftsmen—is similar to things they had in Egypt. They had holy items that were supposed to symbolize the presence of the gods, and they would carry those things around on staves from one temple to another. People then could come and see the power of the gods there. Most likely, the artisans that built the Ark of the Covenant had built those items in Egypt, and while it was very different theologically, we can get a glimpse of how they would have looked. We have depictions of these Egyptian items, and we can get a good idea of them. It is the same with movable structures like the Tabernacle. They were building those structures in Egypt. Most likely, and we are talking about material culture here, they learned how to build this kind of building in Egypt, and the Tabernacle would have looked similar to the Egyptian structures.

Besides material culture, I think it would have influenced the way the Israelites would write and present information. For instance, from studying accounts of theophanies or of prophets seeing God—and anytime someone sees God—I think it is an experience so beyond what everyone else has seen that there are no words to describe it; you cannot describe it. The authors struggle with images and words to try and explain to an audience an experience that they will never be able to understand because they have not had it. Even given the wonderful realities that the author saw, they are going to turn to their culture to try and figure out how to explain it. If you study the Genesis accounts, the things that are pre-Egyptian experiences are more similar to the way the Mesopotamians will describe coming into the presence of a god. But after the Exodus, those accounts are more similar to the way the Egyptians describe how they see God. Now I am not suggesting that the way

God looks changes, but I think their cultural library, the way they were used to explaining things and writing things, was significantly changed in Egypt. And they brought from Egypt a literary and architectural culture and a million other things that influenced the way they wrote, the way they thought, and the way they built. I think we can understand those types of elements better if we understand Egyptian culture.

Second, if we are going to really understand the Bible, some of these historical events that we have already mentioned are important. I do not think we will really understand the prophecies of Egypt like “Are you going to rely on a broken reed like Egypt” unless we understand that at that time period, Egypt was having one dynasty take over another. Their armies were largely mercenary, so the army would make a promise to support them, and then Egypt would experience a dynastic change and the army would not honor the agreement. Or they were coming up to battle, and when the mercenaries saw the overwhelming numbers, they would leave because they did not have loyalty to anyone. So there are a few times when Egypt attempted to go help Israel and were not able to help, and that is why the Lord refers to them as a broken reed. It is also why he said, “Why would you rely on the strength of man, rather than on the strength of God?” If we are going to understand Josiah being killed by the Egyptians, and why Jehoiakim is put on the throne by the Egyptians instead of his brother, and why Babylon is coming down—or as they referred to it earlier, “the miraculous rescue of Jerusalem”—we have to understand how Egypt played a historical role. The more we understand what was going on historically, the better we will understand the subtext of the Bible. I think one can understand the major messages even without knowing the history of Egypt, but nuances will come when one is more familiar with the historical setting. Things that might not have been thought of before will be opened to the mind and give more tools that the Lord can work with as he tries to enlighten the student.

*RE: Could you suggest two sources for a person who simply wants to know a little bit more about Egypt so that when they read the Old Testament, they can understand more?*

**Muhlestein:** I will give you some sources on various levels. If you want to know just the basic history of Egypt in a very readable, interesting, and entertaining format, there is a great book by Erik Hornung, *History of Ancient Egypt: An Introduction*. Something that I think is of interest, and in particular to Latter-day Saints, that will help them understand a lot of these historical

events having to do with the fall of Israel and Jerusalem that we have just been talking about is called *Glimpses into Lebi's Jerusalem*. It has several articles that talk about these things that will help people understand the nuances. If you really are interested in this kind of thing, and this would go beyond just Egypt, a really good book that is long and well-written with a lot of scholarship in it is by Kenneth Kitchen, called *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*. He brings in all these Egyptian texts and Mesopotamian and Hittite and Moabite texts to help us understand how various things tie in to Israel. There is also a fun book by James Hoffmeier called *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* that I think is a really interesting one about the Joseph and Exodus stories. He is an Egyptologist and a good Biblical scholar and a good friend of mine. He does a great job.

**RE:** *You talked about how if we understand Egyptian history and culture, it can help us elucidate what is going on because the artisans came from Egypt. Some people struggle with this, about influence, and how if a temple was organized in Mesopotamia, it can tell us what a temple looked like in Israel. They want the revelation to come in a vacuum. They think that there was no outside influence, that it came straight from heaven. Though it is so different from anything anyone has ever seen or heard before, we now know that virtually from the Old Testament to the New Testament period, these cultures influenced each other. This is not a modern understanding; we built our first temple in Kirtland and brought Artemus Millet down to help with the stonework. Well, he brought down his own skills, tools that he was using before there was ever a temple. He had an idea about how to do it. He brought these pattern books. Now obviously the Lord had inspired the command to build it and the Lord inspired some unique aspects of it, but nevertheless, he was using the same saw that would build a Baptist church or a city hall. How do you help people realize that we are not saying that they simply borrowed, but that what we have in the Bible is not simply a borrowing, but inputs? How do you draw that line?*

**Muhlestein:** I think it is a great question. I have people ask this often. I use the example that you just used and two other examples from modern Church history. So, besides what you mentioned, we know that Brigham Young sent people out to study architecture of the world before he built the Salt Lake Temple. He wanted them to be familiar with architectural elements that were already being used, and when they came back he had some definite ideas about how the Salt Lake Temple should be built. There were

clearly inspired things that were different from any other building, and yet they have architectural elements from what these men had studied. Another example is one that Elder Perry mentioned in the October 2009 conference about the Manti temple. There were a bunch of Norwegian ship builders who were called to build the temple. They knew how to build ships, so the roof is basically an upside-down ship. It is a wonderful, unique temple, but they used the skills they had acquired doing something else and combined it with the inspiration of the Lord to build what God wanted built. And that seems to me to be very similar to what we probably see happening with the Israelites. They learned how to build, and then the Lord gave them directions on what he wanted the structure to look like. They knew how to do it because they had this experience in Egypt. My guess would be that the Lord put people in Egypt, in positions, to learn these crafts. Even when the Lord wants something built in a particular way, there are always going to be decisions you have to make on your own. I believe those decisions are going to be influenced by the experiences that you have already had. That is the kind of influence that I suspect we see as we have these wonderful artisans building something magnificent like the ark of the covenant and the tabernacle.

**RE:** *Why do people have a problem understanding this influence in Old Testament times? Why do Latter-day Saints struggle with the idea that there might be some similarities?*

**Muhlestein:** I am not sure I can answer that. I have never quite understood why we struggle with it. I think it might be partially because we want everything to be so directly from God that man could not influence it at all. This is even something Joseph Smith struggled with, trying to help people understand, "Yes, I am receiving revelation from God, but I am also a man, and these two things are going to combine in what we are doing." That is the nature of life. We get inspiration and information from God, and we have to make it work in the way we are capable of making it work. For some reason, we do not like to see that in these grand stories of the Old Testament. Maybe that is part of the reason. They are grand and moving and almost epic. There really are epic stories in the Old Testament, and we may hate to see them sullied by something like a person's experience, but I think for me it brings them to life. I understand that someone in the Old Testament was going through, in many ways, the same kind of struggles I am, and that the Lord was asking them to work in the same kind of way I am working. Then I will see someone like Gideon, who has his doubts, and his weaknesses, and yet the Lord works

with him and brings about amazing miracles. It makes me think maybe he could do something with me as well. So for me it is a comfort to see that the Lord worked with them using what they had, and they were able to bring about marvelous things.

**RE:** *If you only had one shot to come into a Gospel Doctrine class studying the Old Testament and teach them one thing about Egypt, what would you say?*

**Muhlestein:** One thing to know about Egypt that has helped me the most in studying to understand the Bible is that the culture of Egypt was very similar to Israelite culture in the way that they both looked to and used symbols. And with Egypt, we have enough textual material and enough history to understand something of the way they used symbols in monuments, in artwork, in writing, and symbolic action as well. That information can come into a mindset of looking for and understanding symbols. That is important because the world of the Old Testament is saturated with symbols. Symbolic action is one of the major messages in the Old Testament and one of the major tools that prophets used to teach in the Old Testament. Yet, in our culture, we have divorced ourselves from that kind of symbol so much that we just think, “What a weird thing for Isaiah to do,” or “Why would the Lord have Ezekiel do that with his hair?” or “Why would he have Jeremiah do that with his swaddling cloth?” The Lord had these prophets teach through symbols both by word of mouth and by action, and we struggle with symbols. I think that is the number one difficulty people have in understanding Isaiah: understanding the symbols he uses. And the more familiar we become with the world of symbols, the more we will be able to extract those precious morsels from the Old Testament. And Egypt is one of the cultures that can most easily help us to learn to traverse the world of symbols.

My academic and career courses changed a little bit from my original intent, I think in a good way, where I work a lot with the Book of Abraham. My original intent, and something I still feel passionate about and one day will get back to, is understanding the Exodus better. In my mind, the Exodus is probably the greatest story in the Old Testament, and—besides the life of Christ, and perhaps the story of the Restoration—one of the greatest stories ever! So much of New Testament and Old Testament and Restoration imagery hinges on the Exodus. To me, understanding the Exodus is one of the most important things we can ever do if we are going to understand what and how the Lord teaches us in the rest of the scriptures. So I think we can understand the Exodus story better by understanding Egypt; and particularly,

when I can understand not only the large, moving, sweeping stories but how individuals play their parts in those stories, it helps me find meaning in my life and fit myself into what I think is a majestic, sweeping story we are in the middle of right now. I can identify more with Joseph and Moses, two of the greatest prophets in the history of the world, when I understand a little bit more about their lives, what they would have been doing, how they would have been living, and the kinds of things they would have had to overcome. That helps me understand the larger picture better and helps me understand how I fit into it better. As one example, I used to teach Old Testament even before I went into my doctorate program in Egyptology, so I was teaching here [at BYU] part time. People would ask, “So Joseph is in prison, and he is managing the prison and it is prospering; how does a prison prosper?” And I would say, “I do not know, maybe it means that everyone got their food on time?” Once I started to study a little bit on slavery in Egypt and so on, I came to realize that prisons were often mines. Prisoners were sent to a mine to work. Now that might have been something different for Joseph, but they were not just a place where you sit behind bars. If you were going to be punished by the Egyptians, they were going to get something out of you. Some of these mines were terrible experiences, often out in the Sinai or something like that. So, whether it was a mine or not, when I try to understand Joseph, I picture Joseph working in this terrible mine, and yet making this place work and making it prosper. And when it becomes that real to me, I can then identify with it more and apply it to my life a little bit more and suddenly that moving picture of Joseph saving all of Israel becomes more meaningful to me. Or the little things that Moses had to overcome and how that fits into the sweeping, wonderful story of the Exodus, becomes more real to me and I can feel more a part of their story and our story because of it.

**RE:** *Did the Israelites build the pyramids?*

**Muhlestein:** They were too late for that.

**RE:** *Why, then, do you think it is a cultural thing associated with the Israelites?*

**Muhlestein:** It is because they are the buildings that everyone is familiar with, and we know that they were built, at least partially, by slave power—although probably not as much as you would think. The pyramids are the buildings that everyone knows, and they were built by people who probably did not really want to be spending all their lives building those buildings, so we think of the Israelites. Even more fun is the reality. We can find, from

roughly the same time period as the Israelites, mud-brick structures of all kinds—palaces, walls, and so forth. For me it is even more exciting to be able to see the kind of things the Israelites very well may have built in some of these cities up in the Delta.

*RE: I think we often think of modern Egypt as a place for tourism. What is the best way to get beyond the tourist Egypt as I read the Old Testament?*

**Muhlestein:** That is difficult, and one of the greatest struggles my discipline has right now is what we call settlement archaeology as opposed to monumental archaeology. Settlement archaeology is more difficult because it did not survive as well for three reasons. First, they were building it out of brick instead of stone. Second, they were living closer to the water, and the water makes it so that things do not last as long. Finally, people still live in the places that were good to settle in, and for some reason they do not like for you to dig up their houses to see what is underneath. So it is difficult to get past that as a tourist or even as someone who looks at *National Geographic* specials or coffee-table books. However, in some ways, Egypt is still our best way to picture what everyday life was like for the Israelites, because if you can get away from the places where there are thousands of tourists on buses, sometimes even as you drive out to someplace like Saqqara, where the step pyramid is, you will go past the green fields where there are still people that are housing their donkeys in things they have built out of mud and straw with palm fronds for the roof. They are out there with their donkeys plowing the ground with a wooden harrow, and it cannot be too different from what it was like when Israel was in Egypt, and what it was like when Israel was in Israel. And those are the ways that we can see what life would have been like for our Israelite ancestors.

*RE: So what is in the future for Egyptian studies for Latter-day Saints? What new areas are Latter-day Saint Egyptologists exploring? What are we expecting in the next five years?*

**Muhlestein:** There is the continuing work on the excavation that I am part of and that Wilfred Griggs leads, and I think we are coming more and more to understand the advent of Christianity in Egypt, which I think is an important thing to understand. We are coming up with better data all the time, so I think we can understand Christianity in Egypt better. Egypt is an understudied yet important part of early Christian history. Egypt was a major player in early Christianity and kind of lost prestige to some degree. Also we have a pyramid on our site, so we are doing some really exciting work with that

pyramid that really is going to help us understand all the pyramids in general. By the time we are done with our studies of this pyramid, which is one of the earliest true pyramids, maybe even the first true pyramid ever, the publication and research will have to deal with other pyramids. It will be a monumental and groundbreaking work on pyramid studies, and people will not be able to write about pyramids without referring to it in the future, I believe. So those are a couple of the important things. The other branch of studies are helping us understand a little bit about Abraham in Egypt, about Joseph in Egypt, and the Book of Abraham in general. I think we are coming to understand better what Abraham may have done while he was in Egypt, what he and others were thinking about when they were teaching astronomy in Egypt, and how the writings of Abraham could have ended up in Egypt, in addition to what influence that may have had on the advent of Christianity. It is funny that in my two different studies I have been studying Egyptology in the Book of Abraham, and I have been studying the advent of Christianity in Egypt through our excavation. Recently, at a conference I presented at in Moscow, I began seeing these two areas of study come together and realizing that they *are* tied together. The history of the Book of Abraham is actually tied with Christians in Al Fayyum where we excavate, I think, in some interesting ways. And so I think we are going to find these things coming together so that we will have a better understanding of the Joseph Smith papyri and the history of those papyri, both ancient and modern. Another project we are working on is understanding the modern history of those papyri. We have some really big things going on with that and how all of that ties together with Abraham, thousands of years before. So it is one long, wonderful story, with lots of interesting twists, and we are finding a few twists as we go along. **RE**