

# KNOWING EVERYTHING ABOUT TIMBUKTU

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## What was Joseph's thinking in his use of jewelry in Egypt?

**A**t the end of that mind-boggling day, in which Joseph rose from mere slave to prime minister of Egypt, we find him wearing a magnificent ring, an elegant necklace of gold, some of Egypt's finest linen clothes, and driving around in an ornate chariot. "Then Pharaoh took off his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph's hand, and clothed him in garments of fine linen and put the gold necklace around his neck. He had him ride in his second chariot; and they proclaimed before him, 'Bow the knee!' And he set him over all the land of Egypt" (Gen. 41:42, 43, NASB).<sup>1</sup>

Do you think Joseph took that stuff off the next day and returned it to Pharaoh, saying, "I can't wear this. I'm a servant of the living God of heaven"? Each of those items was a functional symbol of Joseph's new status and power in Egypt. But those functional symbols—very tangible things—raise the ever-burning question of faith and cultural assimilation. Joseph's meteoric rise to power completely encapsulated him

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in Egyptian reality. In one day he soared to the very top of what it meant to live in Egyptian life and culture.

As a follower of the living God of heaven, how far should he go? Was it all right for Joseph to wear jewelry or participate in other tangible Egyptian cultural idioms? How far can God's people go in following the cultural expressions of their day and remain distinct, pure, a living witness?

How did Joseph wend his way through Egyptian culture without becoming assimilated into it? How was he able to maintain both his faith and his witness and remain distinct—yet be a part of his real world?

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If Joseph with his impeccable moral and spiritual character could wear jewelry, why can't we? If we put on Joseph's colorful robe and dream of being a people as faithful as he, why can't rings and necklaces be part of that glorious vision? Doesn't Joseph's very example prove that character, not externals, is what is really important?

We're living in a time when many are struggling with the rationale for our Adventist positions on jewelry and other lifestyle issues. There seems to be confusion as to what the Bible and Spirit of Prophecy are truly saying on lifestyle issues and what we call Christian standards. Biblical principles and values are applied inconsistently. There is both legalism and the fear of legalism.

When our positions are perceived

as inconsistent and unreasonable—not applicable to life in the 21st century—young people in particular leave the church and turn elsewhere.

Meaningfully communicating biblical values to young people is particularly challenging. One of the arguments that never goes away is the question of culture. It seems that all the significant passages of Scripture on lifestyle issues are downplayed as either cultural or not saying all we have thought they have said.

This goes for the Spirit of Prophecy as well. The writings of Ellen White are projected as cultural, dated, incomplete, legalistic. People are looking for Christ-centered standards that are based on sound biblical principles. Unfortunately, for many, any appeal to Scripture for concrete injunctions and specific commands on lifestyle issues seems more like legalistic rules. This leaves the question of application open, cultural, elusive.

Since some have used Joseph as an example of jewelry usage, and because jewelry is viewed as a cultural issue, it can be used as an example of how Joseph likely related to the varied cultural pressures of his day. While doing this, it is important to keep in mind a broader spectrum of Seventh-day Adventist Christian lifestyle issues. This is more than talking about jewelry or ornamentation per se, but raising the question

of how tangible is Christian living in contemporary culture.

How Egyptian did Joseph look? His brothers "did not recognize him" (42:8). Joseph likely looked Egyptian to them. But though he may have appeared quite Egyptian to his brothers (who really didn't know that much about being Egyptian anyway), how authentically Egyptian did Joseph truly appear to those who knew him or knew the subtle differences expressed in his personal lifestyle and choices? No matter what we can know for sure, it is clear that Joseph does present an example of a consecrated people where external cultural forms make a difference.

### Understanding Culture

According to Charles C. Case, "Everyone is convinced that he knows what culture is. It has become a commonplace metaphor to which anyone can attach his inadequate thoughts or clever opinions."<sup>3</sup>

Culture is only one of several factors involved in shaping human existence. Setting, situation, people, and communication are also important. But culture is like glue. It is the element that ties these factors together. Culture also "encompasses those aspects of being that are learned, those regularities that are acquired, those things that are gained through association with other humans."<sup>4</sup> In this sense, cul-

ture is in a fundamental way the most human part of human existence. In fact, behind the customs and the tools, the social habits and behavior, of human existence, lies the framework of a plan. It's a human plan. The plan of culture.

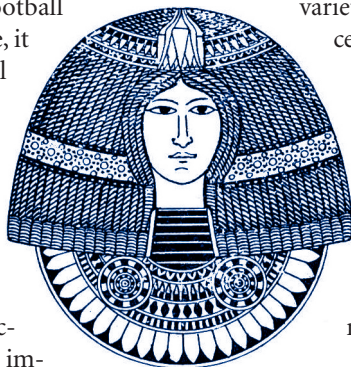
"Culture is the construct behind overt behavior. Like a blueprint or work schedule it is prior, basic, and necessary to every action. Like plays and rules of football or the recipe of a cake, it determines the final result."<sup>5</sup> Putting it differently, culture is a script one follows to create behavior. It is like a theatrical play in which actors with a script are given direction and allowed to improvise, and yet the play must follow the plot. "Culture is placed not at the descriptive end of the behavioral episode but rather at the beginning."<sup>6</sup> In this way, then, culture shapes behavior more than it reflects behavior.

"If culture is to be accepted as a dynamic functioning factor in behavior then it must be seen as immediate, participating, and invariably present as a prerequisite to behavior. Culture is not the description abstracted from the observation of human activity; it is not norms, or statistical averages, but the cognitive

plans that are present before activity occurs. Culture is not the result of behavior, but determines behavior."<sup>7</sup>

All this still eludes clear definition. Though we cannot always define the essence of culture, however, it is inextricably bound up with human life in society. Culture at bottom is social. The world of culture is a world of values concerned with what is good for human beings. In all its forms and varieties, culture is a concern with the temporal and material realization of those values. Culture expresses itself in tangible ways. Even the immaterial dynamics of culture are realized in temporal and material forms.

"Human effort presses on to employ in concrete, tangible, visible, and audible forms what has been imaginatively discerned. The harmony and proportion, the form, order and rhythm, the meaning and ideas that men intuit and trace out as they confront nature, social events, and the world of dreams, these by infinite labor they must paint on wall or canvas, print on paper as systems of philosophy and science, outline in carved stone or cast in bronze, sing in a ballad, ode or symphony. Visions of order and justice, hopes of glory, must at the cost of much suffering



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be embodied in written laws, dramatic rites, structures of government, empires, ascetic lives."<sup>8</sup>

This illuminates the Apostle Paul's exhortation, "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its mold, but let God remold your mind from within" (Rom. 12:2, Phillips). Culture, at bottom, is a paradigmatic story in and of itself. Like most paradigms, culture is comprised of multiple supporting stories. Each of the tangible expressions of contemporary culture (our world), no matter the milieu of time or specific context, have a way of capturing our interest. Whether the arts, music, architecture, customs and lifestyle, fashions, habits, values, beliefs, or ways of looking at things—each in their own way tell a story, create a worldview. They have an uncanny way of slipping past our conscious mind, affecting us in subtle ways. Not all this is bad, but culture can sidetrack us to the point

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#### All About Timbuktu

In her book *Wrestling With Angels*, Naomi Rosenblatt tells of her struggle to maintain her identity when she first came to the United States from Israel in the 1950s. She landed in New York with all its affluent consumerism, and she struggled to maintain the spartan values she was raised with.

Passing by the seductive display windows of Saks, Tiffany's, and Bergdorf's was a constant lure to embrace the culture around her. As she walked down Fifth Avenue, stealing an occasional glance at the marvelous storefront offerings, she used to hum her old school songs with their Hebrew lyrics about plowing and protecting the land. With each passing window, she hummed louder

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and hurried faster down the street.

"No matter what our roots are," she writes, "if we develop an authentic personal identity early on, it will anchor us throughout our life." Her mother used to tell her, "Even if you come from Timbuktu, if you know everything there is to know about Timbuktu, you can travel anywhere in the world and never lose your way."<sup>10</sup> Timbuktu is the proverbial word for nowhere. If you remember your humble roots, and everything there is to know about them, you can go anywhere in the world and never lose your way.

One reason that Joseph bore the test of prosperity in Egypt is that he knew everything there was to know about Timbuktu—his humble roots. As long as he remembered certain things about his past—who he was—the lure of prosperity would never have power over him. As long as he remembered everything there was to know about Timbuktu, he could not lose his way in a pagan culture.

But what was Joseph's Timbuktu? When Joseph harked back into his past, what were the values that sustained him in Egyptian moral and spiritual values? Part of Timbuktu for Joseph was a solemn moment of family spiritual revival and consecration:

"God said to Jacob, 'Arise, go up to Bethel and live there, and make an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau.' So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, 'Put away the foreign gods which are among you, and purify yourselves and change your garments; and let us arise and go up to Bethel, and I will make an altar there to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone.' So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods which they had and the rings which were in their ears, and Jacob hid them under the oak which was near Shechem" (Gen. 35:1-4).

One gets the sense that his was no

ordinary moment in the life of Jacob and his family. Jacob's only daughter, Dinah, had gone off to visit the daughters of the land (check out a little of contemporary culture of her day) and was raped by Shechem, the son of Hamor the Hivite (34:1, 2). That all ended with Simeon and Levi vengefully slaughtering and looting an entire city (vss. 25-29).

Jacob's family was on a fast track toward moral and spiritual ruin. But God intervened. He called Jacob's family to an experience of worship. "Arise, go up to Bethel and live there, and make an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau" (35:1).

In his heart, Jacob knew that he and his family could not come before God in worship while their lives were so filled with pagan influences, moral compromises, and spiritual indifference.

"With deep emotion Jacob repeated the story of his first visit to Bethel, when he left his father's tent a lonely wanderer, fleeing for his life, and how the Lord had appeared to him in the night vision. As he reviewed the wonderful dealings of God with him, his own heart was softened, his children also were touched by a subduing power; he had taken the most effectual way to prepare them to join in the worship of God when they should arrive in Bethel. 'And they gave unto Jacob all the strange gods which were in their

hand, and all their earrings which were in their ears; and Jacob hid them under the oak which was by Shechem."<sup>11</sup>

A moment of family spiritual renewal. Heartfelt moments of consecration and worship. Joseph was there. Just a lad. Young. Impressionable. What did he learn that day as he witnessed firsthand his father's





moving testimony and then his big brothers and aunts and mother and stepmothers—each removing certain garments and idols and pieces of jewelry from their lives in an act of consecration and worship? Two things!

First, Joseph's young mind was impressed with the reality that the artistic expressions of culture that people are so inclined to wear and adorn themselves with are value laden. They express moral or spiritual value which the wearer wittingly or unwittingly identifies with. Their sense of self, value system, and view of God is somehow locked up in these concrete expressions.

Second, Joseph learned that genuine consecration to God finds tangible expression in shedding those cultural idioms that might convey ungodly values. Consecration to God includes external forms. Though you can have the external forms in your life without consecration, you cannot have consecration without it affecting the external forms that in one way or another compete with that very consecration. Doing and being are inseparably linked. This was the Timbuktu that kept Joseph from losing his way in the pagan Egyptian world.

Tangible artistic expressions reflect the worldview of its author or culture and powerfully convey the moral and spiritual values and ideals of that worldview. Anyone who has

visited Egypt or museums featuring Egyptology cannot help being impressed with the sheer power of Egyptian artistic expression. Magnificent architecture. Grand sculptures. Impressive pyramids. Graphic reliefs and murals. Stunning color. A culture steeped in artistic expression. You could not live in Egypt without being touched or influenced by the incredible power of its integrated cultural message.

It's one thing for the power of a given culture and its tangible expressions to be everywhere all-pervasive in its influence. But it's another thing to bring to our body or bring to our life or bring to our lifestyle those very objects, behaviors, experiences, or icons. The moment we do, we identify with them. Their moral and spiritual values somehow attach to our inner private world. Culture is no longer objective, no longer out there. Now it is internal. We are being shaped by it within. We experience and come to own culture by participating in its forms. Not all that culture brings to our inner psyche is bad, certainly; nevertheless, it is spiritually and morally formative in its impact.

*Patriarchs and Prophets* makes some interesting observations with regard to Joseph, this time while in Egypt as a mere servant:

He "was here exposed to temptations of no ordinary character. He was in the midst of idolatry. The

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worship of false gods was surrounded by all the pomp of royalty, supported by the wealth and culture of the most highly civilized nation then in existence. Yet Joseph preserved his simplicity and his fidelity to God. . . . The desire to gain the favor of the Egyptians could not cause him to conceal his principles. Had he attempted to do this, he would have been overcome by temptation; but he was not ashamed of the religion of his fathers, and he made no effort to hide the fact that he was a worshiper of Jehovah."<sup>12</sup>

In an environment in which culture supported false worship, Joseph made no effort to hide the fact that he was a worshiper of Jehovah. Obviously, this means Joseph's character, life, and lifestyle did not follow the cultural norms of Egyptian society. One could tell where Joseph stood by his lifestyle.

There's more. Pharaoh promoted Joseph to a position of command over all Pharaoh's princes and officials "that he might teach his elders

wisdom" (Ps. 105:22). The Living Bible reads, "At his pleasure he could imprison the king's aides and teach the king's advisors."

Joseph taught Pharaoh's leaders wisdom. According to Genesis 41, Joseph became Egypt's prime shaker and mover. Joseph was looked up to as possessing something different. Did he just go along for the ride, or did Joseph preserve and promote a radically different lifestyle?

"Through Joseph the attention of the king and great men of Egypt was directed to the true God; and though they adhered to their idolatry, they learned to respect the principles revealed in the life and character of the worshiper of Jehovah."<sup>13</sup>

Character has to do with heart, demeanor, attitude, personal ethos, and temperament. Life has to do with concrete external expressions of what is in the heart. Life is what tangibly flows from one's inner private world of moral and spiritual being. Not only were godly principles being expressed via Joseph's character, but they were

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tangibly expressed in what Joseph said, what he ate, how he dressed. Being and doing together wonderfully expressed truth about God and what it means to be His servant in a comprehensive integrating pagan culture that molded minds and hearts in an entirely different direction.

There is a tendency in the Old Testament to devalue the significance of jewelry as a symbol of ultimate value. Wisdom literature like Proverbs, Job, and the Psalms create a contrast between wise instruction on the one hand, and silver and gold and precious jewels on the other (Prov. 3:13-15; 8:10, 11; 20:15)

This is no speculative connection! Egyptian civilization was a culture steeped in artistic expression. Jewelry and personal adornment was at the heart of its very religious moral life. In his book *Jewels of the Pharaohs*, Cyril Aldred writes how personal adornments were worn by men and women alike and that even

the gods had their jewelry. The occupation of jeweler was one of the most flourishing businesses in ancient Egypt throughout its long history. Egyptian ornamentation was used for the expression of its cultural, social, religious, and magical practices and convictions.

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Imagine Joseph—knowing all there was to know about his Timbuktu—teaching Pharaoh's leaders true wisdom. In one way or another, day after day, devaluing what was at the very heart of their religious moral experience and expression.

Adornment was a concrete expression of the individual Egyptians' interests. Their values, their concerns and fears. Concrete expressions of their standing in society and before the gods.

Some people say they feel naked without certain forms of adornment, cosmetics, or garments—whether male or female. This is how the Egyptian people would have felt: vulnerable and naked without their ornaments. But Joseph's life and character and convictions and wise instruction would steadily devalue these very things in their eyes. As they watched his life, they would always be confronted by something vastly better—somehow more real.

When things are devalued, they become less important. Set aside. Something else becomes more important. In the process they lose their charm and drop off.

When Debbie came to church for the first time, she was wearing a white mink coat and decked to the hilt with jewelry, colorful cosmetics, and all that goes with it—shoes, purse, dress, hairstyle. Debbie was a jet-set-yuppie real-estate agent whose wild parties featured coke served in tiny silver cups and snorted through \$100 bills. She drove fancy cars and lived in a big house. She had it all.

Studying the Bible with Debbie and her husband, Rick, was a real experience, to say the least. But here

she was, her first Sabbath in a Seventh-day Adventist Church and in my pastor's class. My congregation at that time was a friendly bunch who knew how to make people feel at home, and so in time Debbie merged right into our church life, where she laughed and fellowshiped and worshiped. No one to my knowledge ever spoke to her about her adornment and extravagant lifestyle.

Then she asked for baptism. *She needs some more time*, I thought as she stood there wearing as much adornment as ever. But I said, "Sure! When would you like to plan it?"

"This Sabbath," she replied.

"OK," I said with a bit of hesitation. "When can we meet to review a couple of things?"

The only time that week Debbie had free was an hour before Sabbath school started, the day of her baptism. I knew she was up on all the things we had studied, so I wasn't too worried. Except, that is, for my chosen style of relating to certain lifestyle issues—let the Spirit lead in His way and in His time. Lifestyle issues need incubation time in each person's heart, especially for new folk. They make a decision on an issue, then fall back to where they previously were. They go up and down. It happens with long-time members as well.

The only place the line needs to be clearly drawn is for leadership.

Leaders in the body of Christ must set the pace toward that biblical ideal of a truly Christ-centered standard in which Spirit-filled hearts and a passionate love for Jesus compels obedience in unequivocal tangible ways. Leaders in the body of Christ do not have the right to interpret or project lifestyle issues from their own perspective. Theirs is the responsibility to engender the lifestyle our world community has envisioned together.

On Debbie's baptism day, she was dressed smartly, but gone were the colorful cosmetics and fancy jewels. She still looked lovely, but considerably different. I wanted to say something about it right off, but bit my tongue. When the appropriate moment came in our sharing together, I asked her about her thoughts on adornment. Here was a woman who had been abused, gone through divorce, used drugs, seen her brother jailed for selling drugs. And she said, "Pastor Larry, I don't need those things anymore. What I want and what I need most is in that water."

When the love and claims of the living God become all absorbing, tangible cultural expressions that compete with that vision are devalued. They become less important, whether personal adornment, questionable styles of music, media experiences, the kind of things we read or watch, recreational pursuits, whatever. Many tangible things that rep-

resent the negative dynamics of our contemporary culture will lose their hold on us when a relationship with God becomes our consuming passion. It happens when we love Him supremely, spend time in His Word, and fill our hearts with the guidance He has given us in the Spirit of Prophecy.

That Joseph wore jewelry is an undeniable fact that shouldn't really bother us much. The ornaments he wore were functional symbols of his status and power in Egypt. He was Pharaoh's deputy with Pharaoh's signet ring, symbolic gold necklace, and the power to legislate. Scripture affirms the difference between the ornaments Joseph wore as prime minister and those he could have worn for personal ornamentation.

Scripture describes various uses of jewelry: as a form of currency, for offerings, as evidence of wealth, to designate social status, as symbols of power and authority, as imagery for God's gracious redemption and our value in His sight, for religious purposes, and possibly to ward off evil powers and dangers, i.e., magic. Scripture does not reject the use of jewelry altogether. But it does devalue and call into question its use for personal adornment and for religious and magical purposes. It draws a direct connection between luxury in adornment and dress and idolatry.

When we understand the differ-

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ence between the contemporary culture of biblical times (the lifestyle, customs, and values expressed by the nations and peoples of the then-known world), the culture of biblical characters (the lifestyle, customs, and values expressed in the lives of individuals knowing or representing God), and heavenly culture (the values and lifestyle Scripture projects as the ideal and true and which has been expressed most fully in the life of Jesus Christ), we can put much of what Scripture says on the subject in context. We can read between the lines better and understand that not everything God's people did represents what God would have had them do.

We need to grasp the principles and the values God's Word illuminates and carefully observe the concrete ways in which God calls for application. While always minimums, such concrete tangible expressions of obedience point the direction we are to go in developing

a distinct ethos from that of our contemporary culture.

#### Where's Grace?

By touching on lifestyle issues and the reality of concrete application of biblical principles and commands, one raises the question of legalism and grace. When you stop to view the incredible moral and spiritual quality of Joseph's life and faithfulness, it becomes clear that the question of adornment has nothing to do with the basis of salvation. If anything, it has to do with spiritual boundaries, or perhaps witness.

If Joseph had compromised in one small area (as Daniel later would be tempted to [Dan. 1:8]), if he had not clearly shown where he truly stood on certain issues, he would have been overcome immediately. In the end it came down to faith. Only faith in God and the worldview He casts enables one to resist the integrative nature of culture.

Paul tells us that resisting the molding influence of the world calls for a transformed mind where we come to understand what is morally good, what is acceptable to God, and what is pleasing to Him as well (Rom. 12:2).

Grace is found in the principles of life that Joseph came to understand. Grace is found in the way that concrete injunctions (rules) illustrate how principles apply. Grace is found in the clarity of values expressed in tangible ways. Grace is found in divine empowerment through faithfulness even in little things. No! This is not a question of salvation, but of witness, of influence, of perseverance. It has to do with standing out for God in a confused, dying world.

In the end, Joseph is not an example of how someone looked. He is an example of how the concreteness of his values affected and sustained his moral life and witness in a culture that would have absorbed him. From Joseph's experience we learn that external forms can express genuine consecration to God. External forms can help maintain unique identity in a world that would squeeze us into its mold. External forms can create boundaries that protect us from experiences that would blur

our understanding of what is good and steal away our innocence of evil (Rom. 16:19). External forms can bring a living witness to the true God and a vision of a better, more abundant way. Egypt experienced and saw something different in and through Joseph. Should it not be so with God's people again? □

## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotes are from *The New American Standard Bible*.

<sup>2</sup> Dennis H. Braun, "A Seminar on Adventists, Adornment, and Jewelry" (D.Min. project, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Berrien Springs, Michigan; June 1996), p. 17; Madelyn Jones-Haldeman, "Adorning the Temple of God," *Spectrum* (December 1989), p. 50.

<sup>3</sup> Charles C. Case, *Culture, the Human Plan* (Washington, D.C.: U.P. of America, 1977), pp. 9, 10.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 16, 17.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>8</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), pp. 36, 37.

<sup>9</sup> Naomi H. Rosenblatt, *Wrestling With Angels: What the First Family of Genesis Teaches Us About Our Spiritual Identity, Sexuality, and Personal Relationships* (New York: Delacorte, 1995), p. 351.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 205, 206.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 214.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222.

