

Blessed Be Egypt My People
Presented at the
Gospel Fellowship Church
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by Nelson Heppner



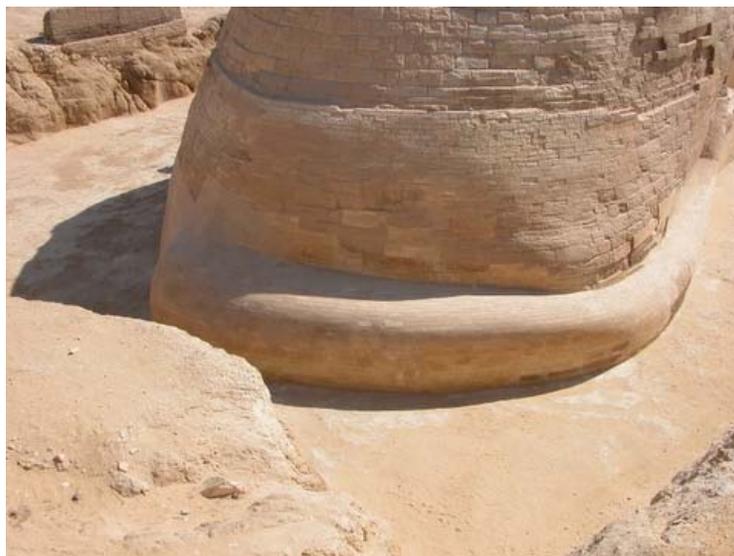
As most of you know, I spent the last year in Egypt. I have had a lot of new experiences, learned a lot of new things, met a lot of interesting people, and seen a lot of wonders. And now that I am home, I get the inevitable question, "How was it", and strangely, I don't really know how to answer that question. I usually say that it was a good experience, which it was, but that answer doesn't nearly satisfy what needs to be said about Egypt. I feel as though I was introduced to a world that is infinitely nuanced and complicated, and foreign but normal at the same time. And in order to give an accurate picture of that world would require me to fully understand it - a task which would take several lifetimes.

I came across a metaphor to describe this, quite accidentally, which is exactly the point. We tend to see things from one perspective and are surprised when we see the other side. I remember an exercise to this effect in a congregational meeting a while ago, where we all looked at

the same box, but saw different things. Well, most of us have seen a picture of the Sphinx, often from this perspective. It is very famous, and easy to recognize.

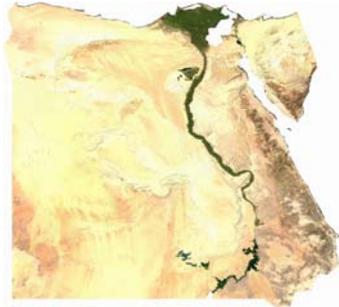


On my first visit there, I was quite surprised when I went around the back and discovered that the sphinx has a tail! Nobody had told me about that before, but really, it's perfectly natural and normal. The sphinx is the body of a lion with the head of a man. Lions have tails. Why wouldn't the sphinx have a tail? In fact, the more you think about it, the more normal it seems. It would be even stranger to see a lion without a tail.



And as soon as you realize this, it ceases to be surprising or even that special. So, those people who study these things and send pictures around the world and then appear in our textbooks don't even bother to mention things like this. Maybe that is the same reason I find it hard to answer "How was it?" But I'll try to give you a little peek through the corner of the window that I peeked through.

I'll start by describing the country to you. Egypt, as it appears today, is a relatively large country on the Northeast corner of Africa.



Egypt has about one million square kilometers, compared to Canada's ten million. But when you look closer at the map, you begin to wonder, where all the towns and roads are? At this point we notice the River Nile. Notice how green this little ribbon is. And how brown the rest of the country is. That is because Egypt is a desert. Everyone lives on the Nile. Without the Nile, there would be very little in Egypt. So, that means that the entire population (about twice Canada's) is packed into a space about the size of Nova Scotia. In fact, that is one of the first things I noticed. It is very crowded.

Roughly half of the people in Egypt live within 150 kilometers of Cairo, a mega-city of about 20 million people.



I used to think Winnipeg was a big city. Thankfully, I did not live in Cairo, but in the smaller city of Beni Suef, about 140 kilometers to the south of Cairo.



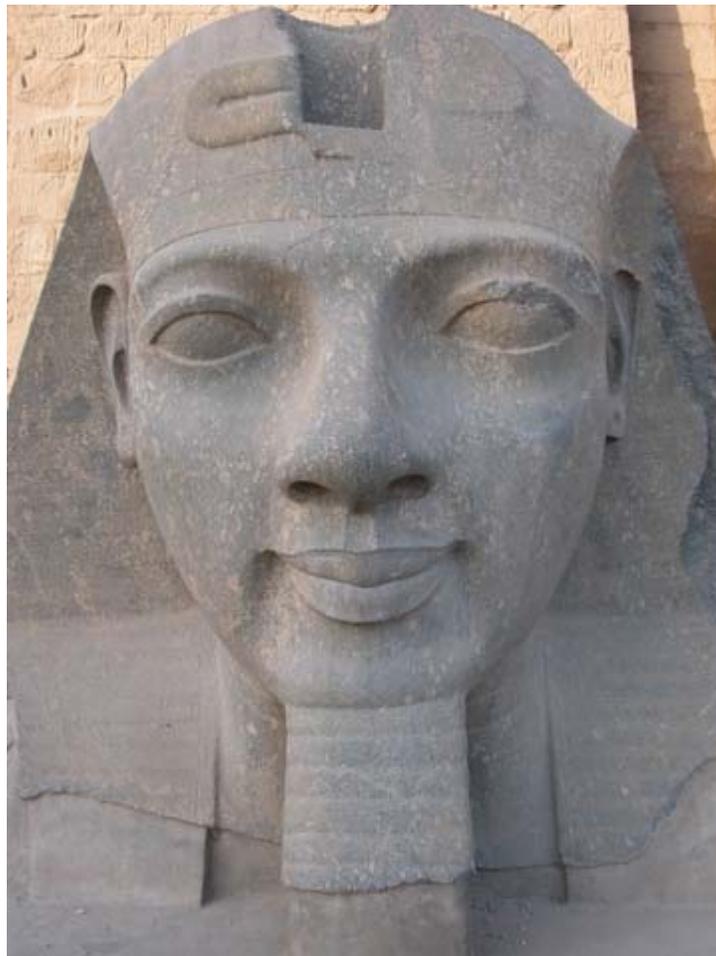
Though still crowded, by our standards, it was much quieter and more laid back than Cairo. And, after a while, it felt very normal.

The official name of the country is *The Arab Republic of Egypt*. But it is a little misleading. The people of Egypt are not Arabs. They are the direct descendents of the Pharaohs and their people. Perhaps this is where we should start our history lesson.

One of the keys to understanding the seeming mess of today's Middle East (and Egypt) is understanding its history. It is difficult to know who we as Mennonites are and why we are the way we are without knowing where we came from. The same is true in Egypt. Ancient Egypt is famous as one of the first developed civilizations in the world. We learn about that in school. We see pictures of the pyramids. We read about it in the Bible. In fact, Egyptian civilization was already almost 2000 years old by Abraham's time. The great pyramid at Giza was already 1000 years old when he passed by.



Once you start to visit the ancient sites, you begin to realize the magnitude of their civilization. It is estimated that 1/3 of all the ancient monuments in the world are in or near the city of Luxor. Here's some pictures from there.



After roughly 3000 years of world domination, they were finally conquered by Alexander the great. He established the famous city of Alexandria, which became a center of study and learning for the ancient world. He built the famous lighthouse, one of the wonders of the world. The library at Alexandria was the largest in the ancient world.

Then, Egypt appears in the Bible again. In a short passage in Matthew, we are told that Mary, Joseph and Jesus flee from Herod and hide in Egypt until the coast is clear. We often don't consider this passage very closely, but for the Christians of Egypt, this story is of great importance. There is a great tradition surrounding that journey, and at each of the stops along their way, there is a church or monastery to remember the events. There is a church in Cairo with a cave underneath, where they are said to have hidden for a few days. There is a well in a small village where Mary is said to have drunk water. There is a cave halfway up the river to Sudan where the family is said to have lived for six months. All this in fulfillment of Hosea's prophecy "Out of Egypt will I call my son".

Isaiah also prophesies that there will be an altar to the Lord in the heart of Egypt. And indeed the church points to this trip by the holy family as the unofficial beginning of the Coptic Church in Egypt. In fact, not long after Jesus' death and resurrection, St. Mark, whom we know as the gospel writer, traveled to Egypt to preach the good news and establish the church. This is the same Coptic Church that continues on until today.



It is one of the oldest churches in the world, yet still vibrant and alive.

By this time the Romans were in power and, like in the rest of the Roman Empire, Christians were severely persecuted. There are many popular saints who were martyred during that time. However, despite the initial persecution, the church managed to grow, and by the 7th century, most of the country was Christian. Then, the Muslim armies swept through and conquered Egypt, along with most of the Middle East. They gave Christians three choices: convert to Islam, pay a heavy tax, or be killed. Many converted, many paid the tax, and some died rather than be subject to such tyranny. From this time on, the Coptic (pharonic) language began to die out and be replaced by Arabic. Even in the church, where these changes were resisted, most of the liturgies were in Arabic by the 14th century. Under these kinds of pressures, the church has become somewhat marginalized in society. Though the people are not Arabs, they have become Arabized and lost much of the distinctive Egyptian culture they once had.

Today, approximately 90% of the population is Muslim. And you are constantly reminded of it by the calls to prayer, beginning at 4:30 a.m. every day, by the mosques on every other corner, by Koranic tapes played in buses and taxis, by the many women wearing higabs or head coverings and people reading the Koran as they wait for the bus or on the subway or anywhere they happen to be.



There is freedom of religion guaranteed in the constitution, but it is illegal for a Muslim to become a Christian and there is subtle discrimination against Christians in a variety of ways. In the past twenty years, the trend has been towards a more fundamentalist interpretation of Islam, which makes the pressure that much greater.

But, that being said, this is where we walk around to the other side of the sphinx and see something different. Our western media would have you believe that these people are terrorists, and it is dangerous to live among them when in fact the opposite is true. I would say that, except for the traffic, Egypt is safer than many of our own North American cities. There is very little crime, and I felt no danger at any time of day or night. The people are almost overwhelmingly friendly and helpful, and generous to the point of embarrassment. So even in what we have deemed an oppressive environment, I discovered that there is another side of life that can be just as normal as ours here in Steinbach.

Well, I've told you a lot about the country of Egypt, but not a lot about what I did there. I went to Egypt with MCC in the SALT program. SALT stands for Serving and Learning Together. It's a one year program for young people to live and work in a new culture and experience life from a new perspective. I ended up in Egypt. You might ask why MCC does work in Egypt. Egypt isn't the poorest country by far in Africa. Some of the Christians are quite wealthy. However, though they may not be extremely poor financially, MCC has decided to stand with the churches as a spiritual partner and supporter. MCC works with the church to build community, promote peaceful relationships, and provide social and economic opportunities to the disadvantaged. One of the primary ways these goals are being reached is through teaching English, which was my main role in Beni Suef.

MCC does not have permission from the government to run its own programs, like it does in many parts of the world, but instead helps the church to run programs that benefit the entire community. As I said earlier, there is a growing movement towards fundamentalism among the Muslims which has been dividing communities along religious lines. Even the Christians, sensing disapproval from Muslims, often

reciprocate the feelings. The church wants to do something about this, but it is illegal to evangelize among Muslims and there are tight controls on what they can do.

But what they have discovered they can do is provide educational services to the community, namely English classes. These English classes accomplish a number of things. First, and most obvious, improved English skills translate to increased opportunities in the workforce, and a key to economic empowerment. But they also bring students, both Muslim and Christian, together in a non-confrontational environment, where they can learn to live and work together as normal people. The church's hope is that the Muslim community will see this as a testimony to love and peace, and improve sometimes tense relations.

So, as a native English speaker, I am immediately qualified to teach English. I had two main assignments. The first was as an assistant to the teachers at El Tawfik Private School, a primary school run by the church.





It was administered by two nuns. I don't know what kind of images that conjures up in your mind, but they sure knew how to take control of the school. The school was open to Christians and Muslims, and there were both Christian and Muslim students. My job was to help the English teachers, which often meant preparing tests and marking them, and teaching occasional classes. I ended up teaching the Primary 6 class quite often, as they knew enough English to understand what I was saying most of the time.

I enjoyed teaching there for the most part, although the Egyptian school system can be quite frustrating. The emphasis is on the marks instead of understanding, the teachers are poorly trained, overworked, and underpaid, and the curriculum is very inflexible. There were many moments when I was left scratching my head at some policy or procedure, but it was not in my mandate to change anything, so I just helped where I could. And every day I rode home with the kids on the bus. It was there that I got to know some of the kids beyond the "What's your name?" or "How old are you?" level. It was very noisy and crowded, but it was usually fun.

My other main involvement was teaching evening adult classes. There is a new church being built, something which isn't common in Egypt.



Permission must be given by the president himself, but the church has obtained permission to build a new church in a new, planned city. This is very exciting for the Christians. The building isn't finished yet, but they are trying to get some programs up and running already. They are meeting in a temporary sanctuary, and have one classroom finished out enough to have an English class. I taught several classes for adults there, and I enjoyed it a lot.



I became friends with many of my students and had many interesting conversations. This next year they are hoping to expand the program and offer more classes to more people.

Besides all of that, I had the opportunity to do some traveling through the region. I went to Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine and experienced some of the incredible beauty and rich history of those places.

Now, in a sermon, if that's what this is, we expect some sort of lesson, and I, too would like to share some profound insight I gained while in Egypt. But, the question "What did you learn in Egypt?" is almost as hard to answer as "How was it?" Now that I've been back for a few weeks, my whole experience is beginning to seem like it was a dream - that I never really left "normal" life here. I think many of the things I have learned have been through osmosis without taking conscious note of it.

What I have learned is that there are many sides of truth - there are many versions of reality - but that none of them are complete by themselves. Let me explain. There are no Mennonite churches in Egypt. 95% of the Christians are Coptic Orthodox, which is the church I was involved in. The Coptic Orthodox Church is very different than the Mennonite church. It did not have a reformation like we did. It is very hierarchical. It baptizes infants. It has different theology on what we might consider key points. And the worship service is quite different from ours. It employs all the senses - clouds of incense, vivid pictures of saints around the church, songs and chants, cymbals and triangles, the feel and taste of bread and wine.

One of the things I found hard to fathom was the veneration of objects or places that were thought to be holy - whether it was the relic of a saint, an icon, or the cave where a holy man had lived in the desert. My mind didn't have a place to put such a concept. I visited and saw many of these places and things with my Christian friends, but not necessarily taking part with them. I thought I had nearly had my fill of Churches and monasteries. But on my vacation, I found myself in Jerusalem, wandering through the old city, seeing the places where Jesus may or may not have been. Many of them are lavishly decorated chapels, which is a far cry from our tradition of simplicity and understatement. But I felt a genuine appreciation for the remembrance of something holy. And I began to understand

just how important these things are to the Christians there. Just as the Word of God through the Bible is the source of faith for many of us, these visual and sensual reminders of the Holy are a source of faith for them. Another beautiful side of truth.



I also got a glimpse of another side of the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East. In May, all the MCC workers from around the Middle East gathered in Egypt for a retreat. We also had the privilege of having a man named Zougbi Zougbi there. Zougbi is a Palestinian Christian who lives in Bethlehem. He runs a conflict resolution center which is supported by MCC. He spent several hours sharing with us the trauma and injustices the Palestinian people have suffered since the creation of Israel in 1948.

Now I don't want to turn this into a political tirade, but I learned some valuable things from him. First, was to view people as people - not to dehumanize them by giving them a label like terrorists or extremists or collateral damage or other blanket categories. All persons have a story and an identity of their own. When we deny that, we can treat them as less than human, without feeling too guilty. Secondly, I learned that when there is a conflict, we - who are interested in peace - cannot be neutral. Being neutral does not help to solve the problem. We must be on the side of

justice. We must stand up for the weak and oppressed. And thirdly, I learned that the way we live our lives here and the kind of decisions we make has a direct impact on people around the world. Not just in Palestine. The kind of products we buy, our attitudes toward the rest of the world, the political policies we support - all have a real impact around the world. So we need to be careful not to think only of ourselves as we live our lives.

Well, that's a start to understanding my year. If you can't remember the long version, just remember the Sphinx has a tail. There's always a new perspective to explore. Feel free to ask me any questions you like. I'm happy to talk to you.

In closing, I'd like to share some verses that are very dear to the hearts of Egyptians. Two of the favorite verses of the Egyptian Christians are Hosea 11:1 and Isaiah 19:25. Hosea 11:1 says **"Out of Egypt I called my son."** This can be interpreted several ways. It can refer to the Exodus. It can also refer to Jesus returning from Egypt. And I think we can also see it as a God's continual call to his children in Egypt and around the world.

Isaiah 19:25 says **"Blessed be Egypt my people,"** but it comes from an even broader context. Beginning at verse 23 it says, **"In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria. The Assyrians will go to Egypt and the Egyptians to Assyria. The Egyptians and Assyrians will worship together. In that day Israel will be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth. The Lord Almighty will bless them saying, 'Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance.'"**

This is my prayer too - that despite our differences and despite the obstacles in the way, we can work toward this vision of a peaceful earth where the Assyrians, Egyptians, Israelites, and even the Mennonites can worship together in one spirit and be blessed by the Lord Almighty.

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