# Genesis Part Four: Jacob’s Lines of Descent, Focusing on Joseph (36:1—50:26)

Like Part Three of Genesis, Part Four focuses on one long story, though a more interconnected one. First, a preamble in 36:1-43 summarizes the family line of Jacob’s brother (paralleling the preamble summarizing the family line of Isaac’s brother in 25:12-18 at the beginning of Part Three). Then 37:1-2a invites the listeners to see what follows as indeed the story of Jacob’s family line as a whole (as 25:19 introduced the main story in Part Three as the story of Isaac’s family line). Jacob’s son Joseph is then the central figure in the account of Jacob’s lines of descent (as Jacob himself was the central figure in the account of Isaac’s lines of descent). So Gen 37—50 is not merely a story about Joseph: it is the story of Joseph’s brothers and his family.[[1]](#footnote-1) Like Part Two and Part Three, it is the story of a family with a father figure at its head, a story focusing on the family’s destiny and thus on its children, a story about conflict in the family, and a story about people engaged in shepherding who find that famine imperils their lives.[[2]](#footnote-2) Whereas Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob thus all have a problem with whether their families will survive because they cannot feed them, Abraham and Isaac both had to handle the question whether their families would die out because they could not have children, while the problem for Jacob is whether his family can achieve enough harmony to survive as one clan.[[3]](#footnote-3)

After the preamble, Part Four divides into three acts: one focuses on how Joseph came to be in Egypt and to be supplies master there, one focuses on how his brothers and his father came to join him (in this section the division into scenes is more hazardous), and one focuses on Jacob’s last days. Part Four thus outlines as follows:

36:1-43 Esau’s Lines of Descent

37:1-36 How Joseph came to be in Egypt

38:1-30 How Judah learned his lesson

39:1-23 How Joseph came to be in jail

40:1-23 How Joseph came to be a dream interpreter

41:1-56 How Joseph came to be supplies master in Egypt

41:57--42:38 How the ten brothers went to Egypt

43:1—45:28 How the eleven brothers went to Egypt

46:1—47:12 How Jacob and his family settled in Egypt

47:13-26 How Joseph rescued the Egyptians

47:27—48:22 How Jacob began to prepare for his death

49:1-27 How Jacob addressed each of his sons before his death

49:28—50:26 How Jacob died, the aftermath, and how Joseph died

One big question lying behind Part Four is, how did the Israelites come to be in Egypt (and therefore need to be rescued from there?). Part Four “opens the door for the exodus theme.”[[4]](#footnote-4) TgPsJ flags that point by describing Jacob’s commission of Joseph in 37:13 as the beginning of the exile in Egypt, the moment when the deep design communicated to Abraham in 15:13 began to find fulfillment, though *b. Shabbat* 10b sees the link more negatively—this exile would never have happened if it had not been for Jacob’s favoritism towards Joseph.[[5]](#footnote-5) Either way, the story points up the strangeness of this element in the Israelites’ story. They knew that their ancestors had a complicated origin that involved Mesopotamia, and Canaan, and also (mysteriously) Egypt. Part Four of Genesis plays a key role in tying together the narrative threads of this story. In doing so, it also answers the question of how Israel came to comprise the twelve clans with their sense of familial unity notwithstanding the tensions and strife between them. Handling that question in Part Four means that Genesis as a whole takes us all the way from creation to the existence of the twelve clans of Israel.

In answering that question, the story of Joseph plays a dominant role. Joseph has many of the marks of the hero in a traditional story. He is the son and grandson of someone important, his birth is unusual, he is ambitious and his older brothers try to kill him, he is saved by a stratagem, he grows up in a foreign country, he gets undeservedly trapped by a woman, he is a dreamer, he is the victor in a contest (in dream interpretation), he marries someone of high rank, he becomes a ruler, he is the lowly person who saves the community, he rules effectively, he prescribes laws, and he is not buried.[[6]](#footnote-6) These marks of a traditional story are worked into a narrative of literary and theological sophistication.

As a literary work, and considered in isolation, the Joseph story parallels Ruth and Esther. It is

1. a short story or novelette[[7]](#footnote-7) (4000-5000 Hebrew words)
2. about an individual who is an actual person
3. but about an ordinary individual who ends up having extraordinary significance
4. focused on life in an exotic foreign land and/or relationships with foreigners who behave in surprising ways
5. history-like in its provision of background information
6. imaginative in its relating people’s conversations and their inner thoughts
7. thus not giving the impression that it is simply factual
8. provocative in portraying characters in their ambiguity and making the listeners think and ask questions about them
9. concerned to hold attention and entertain
10. skillful in raising suspense and resolving it
11. more a creative work of art than the deposit of traditions though using traditional motifs
12. complete in its own right and emplotted (unlike modern Western short stories)
13. yet integrated into Israel’s story (more systematically than Ruth and much more than Esther)
14. a portrayal of events working out through human decision-making and coincidence
15. yet pointing to God’s involvement in events (more explicitly than Ruth and much more than Esther)

Among the distinctive features of the account of Jacob’s lines of descent is thus the way “belief in providence has taken the place of belief in theophanies.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Parts Two and Three of Genesis have portrayed the effectiveness of much human decision-making, have related important conversations between characters, have described conflicts and reconciliations between them, and have sometimes left ambiguous the attitudes and motivations of key characters in a way that requires the listeners to enter into the narrative in order to interpret them. Such features become central markers in Gen 36—50. Related to them are further distinguishing markers, “the pivot of irony upon which the entire plot turns,”[[9]](#footnote-9) and the raising and resolving of suspense.

It’s possible to disentangle the story centering on Joseph himself (roughly, Gen 37; 39—47) from the broader account of Jacob’s family line, and it may have existed as a separate short story or novelette that then came to be the dominant element within Part Four of Genesis. Yet the characteristics and motifs of Part Four as a whole such as irony, deceit, sibling rivalry, the favoring of a younger son, and the focus on clothing and food, appear in Gen 36—50 outside the Joseph story as well as inside it. As with the rest of Genesis, the scholarly world has worked hard to trace the history of the development of the chapters,[[10]](#footnote-10) but it has reached no consensus on the nature of this development.

# Genesis 36:1-43— Esau’s Family Line, Marginalized but Not Forgotten

## Overview

As the story of Isaac’s family line opened with a preamble giving an account of his elder brother Ishmael’s descendants, so the story of Jacob’s family opens with a preamble giving an account of Jacob’s elder brother Esau’s descendants, before it will move on to its own focus.

## Translation

1These are the lines of descent of Esaw (i.e., Edom). 2Esaw got his wives from the daughters of Kena‘an: Adah daughter of Elon the Ḥētite, Oholibamah daughter of Anah, daughter of[[11]](#footnote-11) Ṣib’on the Hivvite, 3and Ba’semat daughter of Yišma’e’l, sister of Nebayot. 4Adah gave birth to Elipaz for Esaw, Ba’semat gave birth to Re’u’el, 5and Oholibamah gave birth to Ye’uš, Yalam, and Qorah. These are the sons of Esaw who were born to him in the country of Kena‘an. 6Esaw got his wives, his sons, and his daughters, and all the persons in his household, his livestock, all his animals,[[12]](#footnote-12) and all his acquisitions that he had gained in the country of Kena‘an, and went to a country away from Ya’aqob his brother, 7because their property was too much for them to live together and the country where they were residing as aliens couldn’t support them because of their livestock. 8So Esaw lived in the highland of Se‘ir (Esaw is Edom). 9These are the lines of descent of Esaw, the ancestor of Edom, in the highland of Se‘ir.

10These are the names of Esaw’s sons:

Elipaz, son of Esaw’s wife Adah

Re’u’el, son of Esaw’s wife Ba’semat.

11The sons of Elipaz were Teman, Omar, Ṣepo, Ga’tam, and Qenaz.

12Timna was a secondary wife to Esaw’s son Elipaz; she gave birth to Amaleq for Elipaz.

These were the descendants of Esaw’s wife Adah.

13These were the sons of Re’u’el: Nahat, Zerah, Šammah, and Mizzah.

These were the descendants of Esaw’s wife Ba’semat.

14These were the sons of Esaw’s wife Oholibamah daughter of Anah, daughter of[[13]](#footnote-13) Ṣib’on: she gave birth to Ye‘uš, Yalam, and Qorah for Esaw.

15These are Esaw’s descendants’ clans.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The descendants of Elipaz, Esaw’s firstborn:

the Teman clan, the Omar clan, the Ṣepo clan, the Qenaz clan, 16the Qorah clan, the Ga’tam clan, the Amaleq clan;

these are the clans of Elipaz in the country of Edom; these are the descendants of Adah.

17These are the descendants of Re’u’el, Esaw’s son:

the Nahat clan, the Zerah clan, the Šammah clan, the Mizzah clan;

these are the clans of Re’u’el in the country of Edom; these are the descendants of Ba’semat, Esaw’s wife.

18These are the descendants of Oholibamah, Esaw’s wife:

the Ye’uš clan, the Ya’lam clan, the Qorah clan;

these are the clans of Oholibamah daughter of Anah, Esaw’s wife.

19These are the descendants of Esaw and these are their clans (i.e., Edom).

20These are the sons of Se‘ir the Horite, the people living in the country: Lotan, Šobal, Ṣib’on, Anah, 21Dišon, Eṣer, and Dišan.

These are the Horites’ clans, Se‘ir’s descendants, in the country of Edom.

22The sons of Lotan were Hori and Hemam; Lotan’s sister was Timna.

23These are the sons of Šobal: Alwan, Mahanat, Ebal, Šepo, and Onam.

24These are the sons of Ṣib’on: both Ayyah and Anah (he was the Anah who found the hot springs[[15]](#footnote-15) in the wilderness when he was pasturing the donkeys of Ṣib’on his father).

25These are the children of Anah: Dišon and Oholibamah, Anah’s daughter.

26These are the sons of Dišan: Hemdan, Ešban, Itran, and Keran.

27These are the sons of Eṣer: Bilhan, Za‘avan, and Aqan.

28These are the sons of Dišan: Uṣ and Aran.

29These are the Horites’ clans: the clans Lotan, Ṥobal, Ṣib’on, Anah, 30Dišon, Eṣer, and Dišan.

These are the Horites’ clans by their clans in the country of Se‘ir.

31These are the kings who reigned in the country of Edom before a king reigned among the Yiśra’elites:

32Bela ben Be‘or reigned in Edom; his town’s name was Dinhabah.

33Bela died and Yobab ben Zerah from Boṣrah reigned in his place.

34Yobab died and Hušam from the Temanites’ country reigned in his place.

35Hušam died and Hadad ben Bedad, who struck down Midyan in Mo’ab’s region, reigned in his place; his town’s name was Avit.

36Hadad died and Samlah from Masrekah reigned in his place.

37Samlah died and Ša’ul from Broads on the River reigned in his place.

38Ša’ul died and Ba‘al ben Akbor reigned in his place.

39Ba‘al Hanan ben Akbor died and Hadar[[16]](#footnote-16) reigned in his place; his town’s name was Pa‘u, and his wife’s name was Mehetabel daughter of Matred, daughter of Gold Water.

40These are the names of Esaw’s clans by their kin-groups, by their places, with their names: the Timna clan, the Alvah clan, the Yetet clan, 41the Oholibamah clan, the Elah clan, the Pinon clan, 42the Qenaz clan, the Teman clan, the Mibṣar clan, 43the Magdi’el clan, the Iram clan. These are the clans of Edom, by their settlements in the country that is their holding (i.e., Esaw, Edom’s ancestor).

## Interpretation

In form, the account of Esau’s lines of descent overlaps with the shorter account of Ishmael’s lines of descent, which also appears in a similar location before the account of Isaac’s lines of descent in 25:12-18; in these respects it also compares with in part with the account of Terah’s lines of descent in 11:27-32. But whereas 25:12-18 focused on listing Ishmael’s sons and then moved onto his death, 36:1-43 is much longer and more discursive. Both accounts have an introduction parallel in form with the introduction to the subject’s brother which follows (compare 25:19a with 37:2a). And in each case this following introduction to the brother’s family line (Isaac’s and Jacob’s) turns out to be but the preliminary to a long and sprawling story. The accounts of Ishmael and Esau are both preliminaries to the accounts of their younger brothers on which Genesis needs to focus. So Genesis is dealing with Esau’s line in a way that does not ignore it but does position it so as to clear the way for the treatment of Jacob’s line. As Ishmael’s line were heirs to a promise to Abraham, so Esau’s line were heirs to a blessing by Isaac. “Esau and Ishmael lacked this promise, but they were not excluded from mercy…. Moses tells the story of Esau… that we may know that he became a partaker of the blessing that Jacob had.”[[17]](#footnote-17) They are part of the penumbra of the story which leads to Israel itself, even though Yahweh is doing something distinctive with that narrower story.

In any period, the relatively positive attitude to Esau and Edom would remind Israelite listeners that the subservience of Edom to Israel in the early monarchy, or the conflict between Edom and Israel in the later monarchy, or the bitterness of attitude to Edom after its infiltration into Judahite territory in the Babylonian and Persian periods, are not the only things to be said about Israel’s relationship to Edom or about Yahweh’s relationship with Edom. The chapter gives expression to the permanent “brotherhood of Edom” with Israel.[[18]](#footnote-18) It comprises a compilation of lists that overlap in content, which suggests they are of separate origin. Possibly it was Edom’s becoming part of the Davidic empire that led to Israel’s having this information about Edomite history, geography, and administration. If so, “the origin and transmission of Gen. 36… is to be understood from its ‘setting in life,’ the task of administering a conquered land.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

**36:1-9**. In giving its account of Esau’s marriages, Genesis is again backtracking.

Initially (vv. 2-5) “the elements forming the unit orient around the themes of marriage and birth” which also suggests a comparison with 29:31—30:24.[[20]](#footnote-20) The opening quasi-formal listing of Esau’s wives overlaps with the listing in 26:34-35; 28:6-9, but it is far from identical. Whereas here Esau’s wives are Adah daughter of Elon (Hittite), Oholibamah daughter of Anah (Hivvite), and Ba’semat sister of Nebayot (Ishmaelite), in 26:34-35; 28:6-9 they were Judith daughter of Be’eri (Hittite), Ba’semat daughter of Elon (Hittite), and Mahalat sister of Nebayot (Ishmaelite). The information has been passed down in varying forms, and we have no basis for knowing which (if either) is historically correct. As is often the case in the scriptural story, the narrator and the readers are not troubled by differences in the way the story is told. Perhaps they have an equivalent to the modern or postmodern recognition that the details of a story (even a historical story) are often designed to give a history-like impression rather than to be taken as factual, and therefore that the details do not need to be pressed and differences between them are not a problem. The detail affirms that Genesis is talking about real people and a real story; but it is not a story that one can turn into history, and to do so is to miss its point. “Attempts in modern research to ‘decode’ these stories like allegories in order to reconstruct ancient histories are projections which miss the semantics inherent to those traditions.”[[21]](#footnote-21) And what the different accounts have in common may be especially significant: “the nationalities of Esau’s wives are more important than their names.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Marrying Canaanite women is by implication an inferior move compared with marrying within the clan of Terah as Isaac and Jacob had. The account underscores the point by listing the two Canaanite wives first (though this order does correspond to the narrative in 26:34-35; 28:6-9), whereas in the next verse and later in the chapter Oholibamah comes second, not third.[[23]](#footnote-23) Esau’s marriages are a mark of his standing outside the main line of the Genesis story, the line that inherits the main Abrahamic promise. The Hittites and Hivvites, subsets of the Canaanites in the broad sense, are peoples we know from 23:1-20; 26:34-35; 27:46-47 and 34:1-31. Although the account of the Hittites in 23:1-20 was quite friendly, we already know from 26:34-35 and 27:46-47 that Esau’s Hittite marriages were for some reason “a source of bitterness in spirit” to Isaac and Rebekah, and it was a Hivvite who defiled Dinah. Marrying a daughter of Ishmael could not be objectionable in the same way (as 28:6-9 implies) but it is another mark of standing outside the main line of Yahweh’s promise, which is working via Isaac. Paradoxically, the wives who do not by their marriage come to belong to the line of promise seem to bear children without trouble.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Genesis perhaps continues to backtrack (vv. 6-9) as it recalls how Esau relocated from Canaan, the area west of the Jordan, to the Se‘ir highlands east of the Arabah, the area that will later be known as Edom. Presumably it was from the Beer Sheba area, where the story situated Isaac in Gen 27—28, that he had made this transition, and he had thus simply moved some way to the southeast. But he had thereby left the promised land, another appropriate indication that he does not belong to the main line of the Abrahamic promise. His move parallels Lot’s move in Gen 13. It simultaneously solves a problem and avoids conflict between Esau’s growing clan and Jacob’s growing clan, while also removing Esau from association with the Abrahamic family. There seems again to be some slippage in connection with the passage’s historical context and reference. Esau was already living there in Gen 32—33, which implies that his relocation took place during Jacob’s twenty-plus years in Harran. But in 35:29 he was in Canaan for Isaac’s funeral, and these verses imply that his move took place when he and Jacob were both living in Canaan, so maybe the story in Gen 32—33 locates Esau in Se‘ir in light of his later move there. The narrative’s taking up the motif from Gen 13 perhaps makes it more likely that vv. 6-8 are a piece of creative writing,[[25]](#footnote-25) but Esau might have been on the move between the region west and east of the Arabah and vv. 6-8 may refer to a final move east.[[26]](#footnote-26) Whatever is the right historical answer, the key point is that Esau has given up his place in the promised land. Gen 36 keep emphasizing that Esau is Edom.[[27]](#footnote-27) Esau is not in Canaan. On the other hand, he is moving to a country that Yahweh is giving him as his assured possession, his *yᵉrušāh* (Deut 2:5; cf. Josh 24:4). “The Esau (Edom) of the Old Testament is not one who is forsaken by God but the ancestor of a covenant people who is recognised in his way by God and the people of Jacob and provided with a genealogy of his own which both in Gen. 36 and 1 Chron. 1 is set forth in great detail alongside that of Israel. This should not be forgotten in arriving at the biblical interpretation of what is to be described as ‘rejection’ in contrast or rather in relation to election.”[[28]](#footnote-28)

**36:10-14**. There follows a more formal account of Esau’s sons born by his different wives, and of his grandsons, though the list is not formulaic. Esaw’s line here works as follows:

Adah Ba’semat Oholibamah l l l

Elipaz Re’u’el Ye’uš Yalam Qorah l l

Teman, Omar, Sepo, Ga’tam, Qenaz, Amaleq Nahat, Zerah, Shammah, Mizzah

(also Qorah, v. 16).

As is the case with other lists in Genesis, some of the names (Teman, Qenaz, Amaleq) are more familiar as the names of clans or towns, in the area south of Israel, so that the list offers insight on the interrelationships of Israel with other peoples as well as providing snippets of family history. The account makes relatively friendly reference to Amaleq—“relatively,” in that he is “only” the offspring of a secondary wife: but so were many of Jacob’s sons. It would have the same implication as the substantive treatment of Edom in this chapter: there is more to be said about Amaleq than is said in (say) Exod 17:8-16.

**36:15-19.** The interest in clans becomes more overt; many of the names overlap with the names of individuals in vv. 10-14. The double mention of the Qorah clan might imply that it split and that the two parts linked up with different confederations. V. 19 is the conclusion both to vv. 10-14 and to vv. 15-19.

**36:20-30.** It raises eyebrows that there now follows a list of people who were living in Se‘ir before Esau arrived—people whom Esau’s clan displaced, as Jacob’s clan will displace the Canaanites (Deut 2:12, 22). But the Horites’ inclusion in the chapter implies that they were absorbed into Esau’s clan and not simply driven out or slaughtered; absorption is regularly the pattern when one people group moves into the area of another (expulsion or slaughter are hard to effect).[[29]](#footnote-29) As Canaan was the eponymous ancestor of the Canaanites, so Se‘ir gave his name to the area where his descendants lived. The Horites also featured in 14:6 but we know nothing else about them except what appears in these two biblical references. Possibly they were a local group related to the Hurrians, the Northern Mesopotamian people associated with the Hittites (as the Hittites of Gen 23 were perhaps a local group related to the Hittites from the north).[[30]](#footnote-30) They have names that look Semitic, but maybe they had assimilated to the local people’s ways of speech.[[31]](#footnote-31) If the inclusion in Genesis of the lines of Ishmael and Esau implies that in their way they are part of the outworking of Yahweh’s promise to Abraham, then the inclusion of the Horites’ clans implies a reaffirmation of a point implicit in Gen 10—11, that people that are quite outside the Abrahamic line are not outside the story of God’s work in the world.

**36:31-39**. The point is reaffirmed by the further inclusion of the list of Edomite kings, who represent the first stage of a fulfillment of the promise to Abraham in 17:16. When the Israelites wanted kings **“**like other nations” (1 Sam 8:5), the Edomites were one nation they could have had in mind. We don’t know when this sequence of kings begins or when it stops, though its reference to Israelite kingship indicates that it dates from Saul’s time or later, which thus incidentally becomes the earliest time when Genesis could have been completed. The list indicates that Edomite kingship was non-dynastic, as was Israel’s initially—that is, there was no necessary expectation that Saul should be succeeded by his son. Like Israel before David’s time, Edom had no capital, and the king ruled from his home town, like Saul.[[32]](#footnote-32) We might guess that the process whereby successive Edomite kings came to the throne from a succession of different towns was analogous to the process whereby “judges” arose in Israel, and perhaps the authority of these kings was local rather than extending to the whole of Edom, like the authority of the “judges.” Perhaps the last king in the list, Hadar, was the last king for a while because it was in his time that David took control of Edom (2 Sam 8:13-14). In Solomon’s day Edom asserted its independence, and now seems to have a hereditary monarchy (1 Kings 11:14). But in Jehoshaphat’s day “there was no king in Edom” (1 Kings 22:47 [48]), though Edom later “set up its own king” and subsequently maintained its independence (2 Kings 8:20-22).

**36:40-43**. The chapter closes with another list of the clans of Esau/Edom. Speaking of the country as their holding (see the comment on 23:4) again suggests that they have secure possession of their land, as Israel has secure possession of its land.

# Genesis 37:1-36: How Joseph the Dreamer Came to Be in Egypt

## Overview

After the heading introducing these chapters as the story of Jacob’s lines of descent, the chapter focuses on Jacob’s son Joseph, who will be a key figure throughout Part Four of Genesis. The main part of the chapter is thus also the first scene in Act One of the account of Jacob’s family line. It tells of Joseph’s father’s favoritism, his dreams of the family bowing down to him, his brothers’ resentment, their selling of him into servitude in Egypt, and their reporting to his father that he was actually dead. It thus introduces motifs that will underlie interactions within the family through Gen 37—50.

## Translation

1So Ya‘aqob lived in the country where his father had resided as an alien, the country of Kena‘an. 2These are Ya‘aqob’s lines of descent.

Yosep, as a seventeen-year-old, was pasturing the flock with his brothers; he was a boy with the sons of Bilhah and with the sons of Zilpah, his father’s wives. But Yosep brought their father a report[[33]](#footnote-33) about them that was bad.

3Now Yiśra’el loved Yosep most of all his sons, because he was the son of his old age,[[34]](#footnote-34) and he made[[35]](#footnote-35) an ornamented[[36]](#footnote-36) coat for him. 4His brothers saw that he was the one their father loved more than all his brothers, and they were hostile to him and couldn’t speak of things being well for him.[[37]](#footnote-37)

5Yosep had a dream and told his brothers, and they went on to be yet more hostile to him.[[38]](#footnote-38) 6He said to them, “Listen to this dream that I’ve had, please. 7So there – we’re binding sheaves in the middle of the open country. And there – my sheaf is getting up, yes, standing.[[39]](#footnote-39) And there – your sheaves gather around, and they’ve bowed down to my sheaf.” 8His brothers said to him, “Are you really to reign over us? Are you really to rule over us?”[[40]](#footnote-40) They went on to be yet more hostile to because of his dreams[[41]](#footnote-41) and because of his words.

9He had another dream and told it to his brothers. “There – the sun and the moon and eleven stars are bowing down to me.” 10He told his father and his brothers, and his father reprimanded him. He said to him, “What’s this dream that you’ve had? Are we really to come, I and your mother and your brothers, to bow down to the ground to you?” 11So his brothers were incensed at him, while his father kept the thing in mind.

12His brothers went to pasture their father’s flocks at Šekem. 13Yiśra’el said to Yosep, “Your brothers are pasturing the flocks at Šekem, aren’t they. Come on, I’ll send you to them.” He said to him, “I’m here.” 14So he said to him, “Go see if things are well with your brothers and if things are well with the flock, please, and bring back word to me.” So he sent him from the vale of Hebron, and he came to Šekem. 15A man found him: there, he was wandering about in the open country. The man asked him, “What are you looking for?” 16He said, “It’s my brothers I’m looking for. Do tell me, please, where they’re pasturing.” 17The man said, “They’ve moved on from here, because I heard them saying, ‘Let’s go to Dotayn.’” So Yosep followed his brothers and found them at Dotan.[[42]](#footnote-42) 18They saw him from a distance, and before he got near them they plotted against him[[43]](#footnote-43) to put him to death. 19They said one to another, “Here: that master of dreams is coming! 20So now, come on, let’s kill him and throw him into one of the cisterns. We’ll say a wild[[44]](#footnote-44) animal ate him. We’ll see what will become of his dreams.” 21But Re’uben heard them and rescued him from their hand, and said, “We won’t take his life.”[[45]](#footnote-45)

22So Re’uben said to them, “Don’t shed his blood. Throw him into this cistern that’s in the wilderness. Don’t lay a hand on him” (in order that he might rescue him from their hand and give him back to his father). 23So when Yosep came to his brothers, they stripped Yosep of his coat, the ornamented coat that was on him, 24got him, and threw him into the cistern (the cistern was empty; there was no water in it), 25and sat down to eat.[[46]](#footnote-46)

Then they lifted their eyes and saw: there, a caravan of Yišma‘e’lites coming from Gil‘ad, their camels carrying spices, balm, and myrrh, going to take them down to Miṣrayim. 26Yehudah said to his brothers, “What’s the gain when we kill our brother and cover up his blood? 27Come on, let’s sell him to the Yišma’elites. Our hands – they shouldn’t be on him, because he’s our brother, our flesh.” His brothers listened. 28So some Midyanite traders passed by, and they pulled Yosep out and got him up from the cistern. They sold Yosep to the Yišma’elites for twenty silver pieces, and they brought Yosep to Miṣrayim.[[47]](#footnote-47)

29So Re’uben went back to the cistern, and there – Yosep wasn’t in the cistern. He tore his clothes 30and went back to his brothers and said, “The boy—he isn’t there! And I – where am I going to go?”[[48]](#footnote-48)

31They got Yosep’s coat, slaughtered a goat, dipped the coat in the blood, 32sent off the ornamented coat, had it come to their father, and said, “This, we found. Please recognize: is it your son’s coat, or not? 33He recognized it. He said, “My son’s coat! A wild animal has eaten him! Yosep has been mauled to pieces!”

34 Ya‘aqob tore his clothes, put coarse cloth around him,[[49]](#footnote-49) and mourned for his son for a long time. 35All his sons and all his daughters[[50]](#footnote-50) set about consoling him, but he refused to be consoled and said, “I will go down to Ṧe’ol to my son mourning.” So his father cried for him.

36Meanwhile the Medanites[[51]](#footnote-51) sold him to Miṣrayim, to Poṭipar, an official[[52]](#footnote-52) of Par‘oh, the officer over the sentries.[[53]](#footnote-53)

## Interpretation

So Isaac has died (Gen 35) and his elder son has done rather well for himself; his family has grown into a nation with kings and they are well settled in their own land (Gen 36). There now begins the account of the fortunes of Isaac’s other son and his family, which are going to be much more complicated; Josh 24:4 sums up the point in retrospect.[[54]](#footnote-54)

In MT Gen 37 constitutes a complete unit, as it constitutes a complete chapter in modern Bibles, but it is only the beginning of a story; it sets the scene for Gen 37—50 in a variety of ways. It begins to answer the question how Jacob’s clan came to be in Egypt despite the fact that Canaan was the country God had promised them and the one in which they had resided for three generations. It also begins to suggest part of the background to the recurrently tricky relationships between the Israelite clans (not least between the Joseph clans and Judah), and/or to encourage Israelites to reflect on those relationships. In beginning to open up such questions, it raises a series of questions of its own which succeeding chapters will need to answer:

* Will Joseph’s dreams come true?
* Can this divided family ever be united again?
* Will Jacob ever discover that Joseph is alive?
* What will happen to Joseph in Egypt, and specifically in the household of Pharaoh’s officer over the sentries?

The chapter’s alternating between reference to the Ishmaelites and the Midianites (and the Medanites) has been the starting point for seeing the chapter as combining J and E versions of the story.[[55]](#footnote-55)

**37:1-2aα.** The account of Jacob’s lines of descent begins with a reprise picking up Jacob’s story after the long chapter about Esau. One might translate the opening of v. 1 as “but”; v. 1 both functions as a footnote to Esau’s story and also makes a link with what will now follow. It makes for a contrast between Esau’s settling in Edom and Jacob’s settling in Canaan (compare v. 1 with 36:8), and it indicates that Jacob is free to live securely (cf. TgPsJ) in Canaan because Esau is settled off to the east (cf. *GenR* 84:1-5). The verb for “lived” (*yāšab*) is related to the word for “settlements” in 36:43 (*môšāb*), and “the country of Canaan” contrasts with “the country that is their [the Edomites’] holding” in 36:43. Verse 1 thus also notes a feature of the audience’s life: whereas Esau’s descendants have their proper home in Edom, Jacob’s descendants have their proper home in Canaan. In addition, the reprise affirms a key point from the end of Part Three, that Jacob came home to Canaan after his long absence in Harran where he had “resided” as an alien; he is now “living” in Canaan, though he will not do so forever. So the verb “lived” suggests a comparison between Jacob and Esau and a contrast between Harran and Canaan. It also suggests a contrast with his father’s relationship to the land, since he was often described as “living” in the Negeb (e.g., 25:11) but not in Canaan proper; in 35:27 he was “residing” as an alien in Canaan. And the account thereby introduces the first great irony of Gen 37—50, since the verse would have made one think that Jacob’s clan is now securely ensconced in Canaan, but Gen 37—50 will tell another story—though one hinted long ago by 15:13-16. The irony will emerge when the same formulation recurs in 47:27 at the beginning of Act Three in Gen 37—50, which finds Jacob/Israel now “living” in Egypt.

The formal heading (v. 2aα) then corresponds to 25:19 in Part Three.

**37:2aβb-4.** As happened in Part Three, the account of Jacob’s lines of descent now leaps forward to an event which introduces the entire narrative that will follow and will unfold over subsequent chapters. Jacob’s clan is settled near Hebron (v. 14), where Isaac had been when Jacob arrived back from Harran (35:27).

If Joseph is seventeen (v. 2aβb) and he was born before Jacob’s final stint in Harran (30:22-26), nearly a decade will have passed since the clan’s return to Canaan. Whereas Benjamin would be barely ten and would be staying at home, Joseph is old enough to be a junior shepherd, learning from his older brothers, though not old enough to go on a long trek with the flocks (vv. 12-14). He’s still a “boy,” a helper or servant, with some of Jacob’s older sons. The sons of Jacob’s secondary wives, Bilhah and Zilpah, were Dan, Naphtali, Gad and Asher. As the youngest and as a mere teenager he is “at the bottom of the heap in his family,” just a lackey to Bilhah and Zilpah’s sons,[[56]](#footnote-56) or (to put it more positively) a kind of apprentice.[[57]](#footnote-57) The note about his being the junior of the family links the theme of Joseph’s story with the story of Ishmael and Isaac and that of Esau and Jacob. It will not be surprising that the kid brother becomes the key figure in the story. His report about his brothers might refer to their shortcomings as shepherds such as are implied in 29:7 or such as indicate that they fall short of the standards Jacob expects and claimed for himself in 31:38-41 (it might then relate only to the conduct of Dan, Naphtali, Gad and Asher). But that understanding requires some inference. More likely v. 2b is one of Genesis’s typical anticipatory summaries and it will be v. 4b that explains the bad report.[[58]](#footnote-58) Either way, Joseph’s reporting back to Jacob is a first piece of background to what will follow in this chapter.

The second piece of background (v. 3) is that Joseph’s feeling free to pass on information to his father is matched or anticipated by Jacob’s feeling free to be fonder of Joseph than of his brothers, and feeling free to show it. Joseph’s ornamented or long-sleeved or ankle-length coat, a “party-coloured coat,”[[59]](#footnote-59) is the kind of garment worn by someone who does not have to work; Jacob treats Joseph like a prince (2 Sam 13:18-19).[[60]](#footnote-60) It is both surprising and not surprising that Jacob has not learned from the role that favoritism played in his parents’ relationship with him and his brother and in his own relationship with Leah and Rachel. The explanation for the favoritism is doubly surprising. One would have thought that Joseph’s significance lay in his being the long-anticipated son of Rachel, and one would have inferred that Jacob has transferred to him his feelings for the woman he really loved. The explanation would then not lie in his being the son of Jacob’s old age; and as 44:20 recognizes, if anyone is the son of Jacob’s old age it is Benjamin. But Joseph was also *a* son of Jacob’s old age and at this point the youngest of his working sons (in a traditional society, children may not “count” when they are very young because of the high rate of infant mortality). But this description of what Joseph means to Jacob may be an indication that again chronologically this note belongs earlier in Jacob’s story, before Benjamin’s birth, perhaps when the clan was still at Bethel. Indeed, perhaps the dream and its aftermath happened back then, which would fit the reference to Joseph’s mother in v. 10 and the geography of vv. 12-17.

What follows (v. 4) is illogical but not uncharacteristic of human instinct: Jacob’s liking or love for Joseph generates their dislike or hostility towards the object of Jacob’s preference. And “hatred directed toward someone is like the strain in a bow: the resolution of the tension must issue in action.”[[61]](#footnote-61) Joseph’s brothers simply couldn’t speak about him in terms of *šālōm*. Already we know that something bad is going to happen to him. Ironically, in v. 14 Jacob will commission Joseph to investigate their *šālōm* and in 43:27 Joseph will ask about *šālōm* in connection with them (cf. 18:7). Indeed, what will follow in this chapter suggests that not being able to speak of him in connection with *šālōm* is a litotes; they could only speak of him in connection with putting him down. “Love unwittingly produces hate”: it is the first instance of “the pivot of irony” upon which the entire plot of the Joseph story might be described as turning.[[62]](#footnote-62) The Jacob family illustrates the dynamics of many a family, with someone loved too much, someone loving too much, and some people not feeling loved enough.[[63]](#footnote-63)

**37:5-11.** There is yet a further piece of background and explanation for the story that will unfold. The narrative first summarizes what will follow in accordance with that common pattern in Genesis; it will go on to elaborate the point in the rest of the chapter. Again the story parallels the account of Isaac’s lines of descent, which began with a revelation about the future and about the relationships of the subject’s offspring. In 25:21-23 the revelation came because Rebekah had a pressing, possibly life-threatening question. Here, why does Joseph dream? But what else can you do when you are the youngest brother?[[64]](#footnote-64) We might think of the dreams as “the notions of a vainglorious heart.”[[65]](#footnote-65) But people in a traditional society know that there is often more to dreams than wish-fulfillment. The audience might be not sure whether to assume that Joseph’s dreams are guides to what it is to expect in the chapters that will follow, if it has not heard the story before. So they put in place the beginning of an arc of tension: will these dreams find fulfillment? In 25:21-23 it was explicit that the revelation came from Yahweh; here it is not (though Josephus makes it so).[[66]](#footnote-66) Neither there nor here is it said that the revelation concerns something Yahweh intends to make happen; in both passages it is simply something that will happen. In both stories Yahweh’s will is put into effect through the fulfillment of the revelation, but both stories leave some wiggle room over whether the events that fulfill the revelation are directly Yahweh’s will or issue from human actions that Yahweh can harness; see 50:20. The dreams also parallel the revelations to Abimelek, to Jacob himself, and to Laban (20:3-7; 28:10-17; 31:10-13, 24), though those dreams were either the means of straightforward, literal communication or revelations of something supernatural lying behind earthly events; each of Joseph’s dreams involves imagery that represents something else, something this-worldly and human, though it might not be difficult to work out at least part of what they represent. As well as leading into what happens in this particular chapter, Joseph’s dreams introduce the motif of double dreams in Gen 37—50. In sharing the dreams, Joseph shows a further incautious freedom of speech whose result is hardly surprising when we discover the dream’s content.

Joseph invites his brothers to imagine the dream as he relates it (vv. 6-7): “There… there… there.” Three participles encourage them to see the scene unfolding before their eyes. “Joseph describes the dream in rhythmic, almost choreographic language…. He is full of his dream, which compels him to tell it to his brothers. In contrast, his brothers’ reply is a cool, almost threatening question.”[[67]](#footnote-67) The story again presupposes that as shepherds the family are also involved in some sowing and reaping; the farming takes place in the open country as they do not own land. The narrative gives no direct hint of Joseph’s understanding of the dream, though it may imply that he is either naïve or full of himself in sharing it. But it does not directly suggest any disapproving of Joseph, and in this chapter he becomes a victim who hardly deserves what happens.

In a broad sense the dream would not take much interpretation (v. 8), and the brothers assume that the answer to their rhetorical questions is “Yes, actually.” They evidently and understandably find pejorative implications in the dream. It seems humiliating, though in the event its implications will be less so, and they may read too much into it: bowing down need not mean submission to someone’s authority.[[68]](#footnote-68) But ironically, it will be their pejorative reading of the dream that brings about its fulfilment in a way that saves their lives. The fulfillment will result from their speaking of Joseph in terms opposite to *šālōm*, but they will be grateful for the results. With hindsight, the listeners might see further significance in the imagery of grain harvest, because a grain harvest will be the cause of the brothers prostrating themselves before Joseph.[[69]](#footnote-69) The more technical reference to Joseph’s “reigning” might make an audience recall that a descendant of Joseph was the first person to reign over the northern kingdom of Israel (1 Kings 11:26), and the double reference to Jacob as Israel in vv. 3 and 13 (the only occurrences in Gen 37—41) would underscore that link.

Joseph recounts the second dream more briefly (vv. 9-11), but in the same listener-involving fashion: “there… bowing down.” The meaning of the second dream is not as clear as that of the first, but in effect the brothers assume it has similar meaning. If the eleven stars stand for the brothers, then Benjamin is included; and while on the basis of the first dream one could infer that Joseph “has internalized his most-favored status” among the brothers,[[70]](#footnote-70) the second dream would go beyond that implication. With further incautious freedom of speech Joseph tells his father about this dream. If Jacob’s reference to Joseph’s mother does not imply that this story belongs chronologically to an earlier stage in the Genesis narrative, perhaps Joseph’s “mother” is Leah, as the female head of the family, or perhaps it is Rachel’s handmaid Bilhah as his foster mother (cf. *GenR* 84:11), or perhaps in Jacob’s imagination (or metaphorically speaking) it is Rachel. In the event, neither does Jacob bow down to Joseph as his brothers do; it is Joseph who bows down to his father (48:12). There is often some slippage between revelations and their fulfillment, as *b. Berakot* 55 notes in connection with Joseph’s dream.[[71]](#footnote-71) Jacob treats the dream as if every element has a concrete meaning, but a dream need not be an allegory. As with stories “based on fact,” one may not be able to press the details, though as with such stories, the details may still be important and the difference between the revelation and the event may be significant.

The response of Joseph’s father and his brothers to the dream (v. 11) parallels their response in Gen 34. There is no ambiguity about the brothers’ reaction; there is some ambiguity about Jacob’s. The reference to the brothers’ fury (on top of the reference to their being unable to speak of *šālōm* in connection with Joseph) makes us expect them to take some action, as they did in Gen 34. Our expectation will soon be fulfilled. Jacob’s keeping the dream in mind suggests his wisdom in this connection, and hints that the audience should join him in watching for the fulfillment. The rest of Gen 37—50 will indicate how Joseph’s dreams do come more or less true in a way that they would not if he had kept them to himself. If he was stupid and arrogant, this implication is not the angle on the story that interests Genesis.

**37:12-20.** So vv. 2aβ-11 have provided the background to the action that follows. As often happens, the shepherds have to lead their flocks quite a way from home to find pasture. Movements of some distance in connection with drought and/or from one season to another are a normal feature of shepherding, as earlier stories in Genesis have shown. With further irony, given that this story follows on Gen 34, the brothers first go to Shechem.

Jacob wants to check up on their *šālōm* (vv. 13-14; cf. v. 4); perhaps by implication he recognizes the danger of venturing into the Shechem area. In what sense is he “keeping in mind” what we learned in vv. 5-11? Somewhat naively, neither Jacob nor Joseph realizes the potential danger of Joseph’s mission. Only here do we read of the “vale of Hebron,” but there is undulating pastureland around Hebron and Jacob’s clan would be encamped in that pastureland, not living in the town. Shechem is several days’ north of Hebron, a long way to go looking for pasturage, so this note may be another hint that the clan are actually still settled near Bethel.[[72]](#footnote-72) Either way, Joseph walks or rides a donkey north; if he is starting from Hebron he goes past his mother’s tomb and past Beth El.

If Jacob knew that Joseph had got lost in the Shechem area (vv. 15-17), he would now have reason worry about him. Why does God disregard both Jacob and Joseph? Joseph will later imply that God is looking the other way as an aspect of his implementing a plan to protect the entire family in due course.[[73]](#footnote-73) The story raises suspense as things look as if they are going wrong and we suspect something nasty is going to happen when Joseph finds his brothers. It might be better if he didn’t find them and had to go back home. But the anonymous guide directs him to Dothan, another day’s travel north along the mountain ridge, “where the pasturage is even finer than it is about Shechem.”[[74]](#footnote-74) There is hardly a basis in the chapter for identifying the “man” as another supernatural envoy (so TgNeoph and TgPsJ); indeed, one might ask where now are the envoys, the camp, which protected Jacob earlier? The man’s appearance is one of the coincidences on which the Joseph story depends.[[75]](#footnote-75)

Now (vv. 18-19) “the point of view changes from that of Joseph, who is about to find them in Dothan, to that of his brothers, who see him coming before he sees them.”[[76]](#footnote-76) To judge from what we have read already, it is not the sight of Joseph that starts them thinking, for the first time, about giving vent to their fury towards him. But they are now miles away from his doting father and they now have the chance to take action. Surprisingly for someone on such a journey, but dramatically, Joseph is wearing the famous coat, as v. 23 will indicate. While the coat would help them recognize him from a distance, it is the dreams rather than the favoritism or the bad reports that have got to them.

A cistern (v. 20) is a large, deep, rock-hewn pit for collecting rainwater, which would be drawn by letting down a pitcher, as in a well. Throwing Joseph’s body into one would mean no one would know what had happened to him. The idea that he had been killed by a lion or some other wild animal would be entirely plausible. Their own implicit answer to their rhetorical question concerning what will become of Joseph’s dreams is that they will thereby avert their fulfillment. The First Testament (like other Middle Eastern writings) knows that a revelation about something to come is not an announcement of something inevitable but a warning or promise that requires a response from its recipients. But the brothers are stupid to think that killing the dreamer will kill the dream. As if you can hope to frustrate a dream in that way! Their response to it will actually facilitate its coming true, though eventually they will have reason to be glad.

**37:21-24**. Notwithstanding his action in 35:22, or perhaps in keeping with it, Reuben acts as the responsible eldest brother. Yet again Genesis first gives us a summary then goes on to the particulars, beginning in v. 22. It is perhaps because Reuben is the eldest brother that he can say not “Let’s not take his life” but “We won’t take his life.” He is making a strong negative declaration, like the ones in the Decalogue.

This cistern (v. 22) is empty. Perhaps Reuben just wants to give his little brother a nasty experience to teach him a lesson. Being thrown into a cistern is the opposite of having everyone bow down to him. And Reuben means to rescue him later. But perhaps Reuben invites the brothers to envisage Joseph dying of dehydration and starvation there—at least it will then mean he died of natural causes; he was not directly murdered.

Reuben prevails (vv. 23-24). While it is indeed surprising that Joseph wears his princely coat while undertaking his errand, it would not be surprising if it does add to his brothers’ bitterness,[[77]](#footnote-77) and stripping him of it would give further expression to their resentment at their father’s favoritism as well as aiding their giving their alternative account of his fate. How terrifying that there should be such murderous hatred within God’s family—but it is the way things have been within Israel, Judaism, Islam, and the church.[[78]](#footnote-78)

**37:25-28**. Is there something callous about the apparent ease with which the brothers then sit down to eat? Are they solemnizing their mutual commitment (compare the meal in Gen 31)?[[79]](#footnote-79) Either way, their dinner is interrupted. Ishmaelites and Midianites seem to be alternative names for the traders (cf. Judg 8:24); another version of their name will feature in v. 36. Both groups are descended from Abraham (see 25:1-11).[[80]](#footnote-80) Here, perhaps Ishmaelites is a more general term for traders and Midianites a more specific ethnic term.[[81]](#footnote-81) Tg translates “Ishmaelites” as “Arabs,”[[82]](#footnote-82) and an English writer could similarly move between referring to “Arabs” and (say) “Egyptians” or “Syrians.” Like Jacob’s clan some while ago, the traders are on the way from Gilead to Canaan; to be passing Dothan, they must have crossed from Gilead further north than Jacob did when he had traveled on the east side of the Jordan as far as the Yabboq. And they are their way further than Jacob’s clan was. Their cargo would be of great value in connection with medicine, cosmetics, perfumery, and embalming.

Judah (v. 26) is perhaps assuming that one way or another Joseph is in danger of death, and like Reuben he wants to rescue Joseph. But killing him will mean that his slain body cries out for redress. In theory, they can overcome that problem if they can cover over his blood so that it can no longer draw attention to itself (cf. Job 16:18; Isa 16:21; Ezek 24:7-8). But can they?

Further (vv. 27-28), Judah can think of a financial incentive for action that will still mean the brothers give expression to their resentment and also teach Joseph a lesson. So that’s how Joseph ends up in Egypt, which for Joseph is preferable to being dead; it will also turn out to be preferable for Jacob’s clan. The figure of twenty silver pieces fits ballpark figures for the sale of human beings in the Middle East and also fits the evaluation of a teenager such as Joseph if his parents dedicate him to Yahweh (Lev 27:5) —on the assumption that a silver piece means a silver sheqel.

**37:29-35.** Reuben has apparently been away, perhaps scouting for pasture,[[83]](#footnote-83) or out with some of the sheep, or away bartering for food. He therefore cannot fulfill his plan to rescue Joseph and return him to Jacob. Tearing his clothes being a sign of grief perhaps implies that he assumes Joseph is dead. He doesn’t now know what to do; more specifically, his words imply that he can’t go home to tell Jacob. Presumably the other brothers tell him what has happened, though the narrative isn’t interested in tying up such ends.

The important thing is how the news gets to Jacob (vv. 31-33), and what is the precise fake news that they are to send him. Once again the story is told in a brisk sequence of verbs: “got, slaughtered, dipped, sent off, had it come, said.” Once again a role can be played by the hated coat, a symbol of Jacob’s favoritism, Joseph’s favored status, and their resentment.

Now it is Jacob who tears his clothes in grief (v. 34). He puts on the coarse clothing that one would normally wear only for work or in private; it is the sole reference in Genesis to this expression of grief. He mourns thus for a long time.

It is not surprising that his daughters seek to comfort him (v. 36), though we have not heard of such daughters before; it is more noteworthy that Joseph’s brothers—who could have revealed that the mourning was unnecessary—also do so. The consoling will imply taking part in mourning rites with him. But he will not be comforted. The point is not that he refuses to cheer up; it is that he insists on carrying on living and dressing like someone in mourning (cf. the reference to mourning in 38:12).[[84]](#footnote-84) The entire Joseph story is “rich in tears.”[[85]](#footnote-85) One can imagine that the brothers’ resentment might increase the more their action shows that they have solved nothing. Joseph is still the one who matters to their father. I will mourn until I die, Jacob says. “He wants to go to Sheol with ashes still on his head and sackcloth on his loins.”[[86]](#footnote-86) It is the first reference to Sheol in Genesis; reference will recur in connection with Jacob’s grief in 42:38; 44:29, 31. While Sheol is not a place of suffering, it’s a place of lifelessness and the term is not one with positive resonances. In connection with Abraham, Ishmael, and Isaac, Genesis has spoken of joining to one’s kin (25:8, 17; 35:29), an expression with more affirmative connotations. Jacob cannot look at death that way, though when he has discovered that Joseph is alive after all, he will do so (49:29). But “nothing further will now be said about Jacob for a long time. The timeless veil of sorrow sinks over his life for many years.”[[87]](#footnote-87) It will be over twenty years on Genesis’s figures before he discovers that Joseph is alive (see Gen 42). Perhaps the audience is invited to see an irony or an appropriateness in Jacob’s having to live with the consequences of his sons’ jealousy and deception.

**37:36**. Meanwhile, alongside Jacob’s grim mistaken belief Genesis simply sets what look like the not-much-less-grim actual facts, though they also make the listeners wonder what will happen next, and wonder what Joseph is thinking and feeling. Genesis “speaks of him just as if he were dumb or a stone or a tree trunk.” And what was God thinking, who “also kept silent”?[[88]](#footnote-88) Whereas Jacob’s feelings are relevant to the plot, Joseph’s are not so relevant,[[89]](#footnote-89) and God’s mind will be revealed in due course (50:20). That perspective will indicate that in some sense the dream did come from God. Both Jacob and the brothers would think that the dream is nullified. “Only the single verse hints at another possibility.”[[90]](#footnote-90)

Medanites (v. 36a) come only here. Medan was another son of Abraham by Qeturah, like Midian (25:2). Ishmaelites, Midianites, Medanites: it’s the coup de grâce of a confused and confusing story. The brothers will kill him and throw him into a cistern; or they’ll just throw him into the cistern. Reuben will rescue him; but he’s missing at the vital moment. Or they’ll sell him to some Ishmaelite traders, but they wait until after dinner and some Midianites get to him first and sell him to the Ishmaelites, and they take him to Egypt—or was it the Medanites? The way the story is told conveys something of the bumbling nature of wrongdoers and the self-defeating nature of wrongdoing.[[91]](#footnote-91) But Switching from Ishmaelites to Midianites and then Medanites might catch the audience’s attention in a suggestive way.[[92]](#footnote-92) And Medanites and Midianites could simply be two ways of spelling the name of the same people;[[93]](#footnote-93) both words can also mean “arguments.”

Anyway, Joseph ends up being sold on to a significant household in Egypt (v. 36b), and the story continues to provide the background for the story that will unfold through Gen 37—50. The importance of Poṭiphar is that he had an important place on Pharaoh’s staff. The story shows one way in which someone might become a bondservant. The brothers had no right to sell Joseph, and Middle Eastern law could view their action as so reprehensible that it will count it as a capital offence,[[94]](#footnote-94) as will the Torah in due course (Exod 21:16; Deut 24:7). But once you have been sold, you have little chance of gaining your freedom, and there was a lively trade in the buying and selling of servants between Syria, Canaan, and Egypt.[[95]](#footnote-95) But the subsequent story (like Gen 23) will show that a bondservant’s position could be quite agreeable and could be characterized by opportunity for achievement. In this sense to speak of Joseph as a “slave” would be misleading.

## What You Wear, How You Dream, What You Eat, How You Lie, How You Cry

Gen 37 introduces five motifs which will run through Gen 37—45 and beyond. All are themes that have been important already in Genesis, all are important human realities.[[96]](#footnote-96)

In Gen 37, Jacob’s gift of clothing to Joseph is a sign of his special love, and thus a provocation to Jacob’s other sons. Removing it is therefore an expression of their resentment and a means of presenting it to Jacob to give the impression that Joseph has died. For Reuben and Jacob, tearing their clothes is a symbol of their grief, to which Jacob adds the wearing of coarse cloth as a sign of mourning. In Gen 38 Tamar wears widow’s clothes, abandons them for clothing that will give a misleading impression of her identity, then puts them back on. In Gen 39 Potiphar’s wife grabs at Joseph’s garment, he abandons it, and it becomes a key piece of evidence in his indictment. In Gen 44 the brothers tear their clothes in grief.

In Gen 37, Joseph dreams twice, which establishes him as a dreamer. Revealing the dreams increases his brothers’ antipathy towards him and makes them want to be rid of him, thinking they can thereby frustrate them. In Gen 40, Joseph’s fellow-prisoners dream twice and Joseph interprets their dreams, which establishes him as a dream interpreter. His interpretations prove right, but it does not help him. In Gen 41, Pharaoh dreams twice, which establishes the importance of the dreams’ message. Joseph interprets it, which leads to his being put in a position of power. In Gen 42 Joseph remembers his dreams and acts accordingly.

In Gen 37, the brothers sit down to eat after they have sold Joseph into servitude. In Gen 39 food is the only concern Potiphar retains. In Gen 40 the dreams concern what Pharaoh drinks and eats, the dreamers are his butler and baker, and the climax of the story is a banquet. In Gen 41, Pharaoh’s dreams are all about food, and the key question is how Pharaoh can manage the sequence of there being more than enough and then not enough for people to eat. In Gen 42--45, food is the reason why the brothers come to Egypt and thus the cause of their meetings with Joseph, and in Gen 43 Joseph gives his brothers a spectacular meal.

In Gen 37, the brothers plan to lie about Joseph’s fate, which they themselves will have engineered, and Reuben lies to them about his plan to rescue Joseph, though his deceit fails. In Gen 38 Judah lives in a place called Deception, he deceives Tamar into thinking that his son will enable her to have children, and Tamar deceives him into thinking she is a prostitute. In Gen 39 Potiphar’s wife lies about Joseph and gets him put in prison. In Gen 40, Pharaoh’s butler makes Joseph a promise that he fails to keep. In Gen 42—45 Joseph pretends not to be who he is, falsely accuses his brothers of being spies, and secretly puts their silver and later his chalice back in their bags.

In Gen 37, Jacob cries as he grieves over the apparent death of Joseph. In Gen 42, Joseph cries as Reuben tells his brothers that they are paying for the wrong done to Joseph. In Gen 43, Joseph is overwhelmed when Benjamin arrives, and he has to find somewhere private to cry. In Gen 45, Joseph cries when he reveals himself to his brothers, and when the initial self-revelation and explanation is over, he cries again on Benjamin and on the rest of his brothers, and Benjamin cries on him.

# Genesis 38:1-30—Another Deceiver Is Deceived but Learns His Lesson

## Overview

An inter-scene within this story in which Joseph is the prominent figure relates how Judah fails in his obligation to his daughter-in-law, Tamar. She had married his eldest son and he had died; his next son had evaded his obligation to enable her to have children, and had also died; so Judah had avoided marrying his youngest son to her lest he die too. But Tamar pretended to be a prostitute and tricked Judah into impregnating her. He acknowledges that he had done wrong and she had not, and she gives birth to twins (one of whom will be David’s ancestor).

## Translation

1At that time Yehudah went down from his brothers and turned aside near a certain Adullamite; his name was Ḥirah. 2Yehudah saw there the daughter of a certain Kena‘anite[[97]](#footnote-97) (his name was Ṧua).[[98]](#footnote-98) He got her, and slept with her.[[99]](#footnote-99) 3She became pregnant and gave birth to a son, and he named him[[100]](#footnote-100) Er. 4She became pregnant again and gave birth to a son, and named him Onan. 5Once more she became pregnant and gave birth to a son, and called him Ṧelah. He was[[101]](#footnote-101) at Kezib when she gave birth to him.

6Yehudah got a wife for his firstborn, Er; her name was Tamar. 7But Er, Yehudah’s firstborn, was bad in Yahweh’s eyes, and Yahweh had him die. 8Yehudah said to Onan, “Sleep with your brother’s wife. Be a brother-in-law to her and raise up offspring for your brother.” 9Onan knew that the offspring would not be his, so if he slept with his brother’s wife, he would waste it on the ground in order that he would not give offspring to his brother. 10What he did was bad in Yahweh’s eyes, and Yahweh also had him die. 11So Yehudah said to Tamar his daughter-in-law, “Live as a widow in your father’s household until Ṧelah my son grows up,” because (he said), “So that he may also not die like his brothers.” So Tamar went and lived in her father’s household.

12Time went on, and Ṧua’s daughter, Yehudah’s wife, died. Yehudah found consolation, and went up to the men who were shearing his flock, he and his friend[[102]](#footnote-102) Ḥirah the Adullamite, to Timnah, 13Tamar was told, “There, your father-in-law is going up to Timnah for the shearing of his flock.” 14Tamar put aside her widow’s clothes from upon her, covered herself with a veil and wrapped herself up, and sat at the entrance to Enayim,[[103]](#footnote-103) which is on the road to Timnah, because she saw that Ṧelah had grown up but she had not been given to him as wife.

15Yehudah saw her and thought she was a whore, because she had covered her face. 16He turned aside to her by the road and said “Come on, can I sleep with you?” because he didn’t know that it was his daughter-in-law. She said, “What will you give me when you sleep with me?” 17He said, “I myself will send a kid goat from the flock.” She said, “If you give me a pledge until you send it.” 18He said, “What’s the pledge I should give you?” She said, “Your seal and your cord, and the staff that’s in your hand.” He gave them to her and slept with her, and she became pregnant by him. 19She set off and went, and put aside her veil from upon her and put on her widow’s clothes.

20Yehudah sent the kid goat by the hand of his friend the Adullamite, to get the pledge from the hand of the woman, but he couldn’t find her.21He asked the people of her place, “Where’s the hostess who was[[104]](#footnote-104) at Enayim, by the road?” They said, “There’s been no hostess here.” 22He went back to Yehudah and said, “I couldn’t find her. Moreover, the people of the place said, ‘There’s been no hostess here.’” 23Yehudah said, “She can have it for herself, so that we don’t become a laughingstock. There, I sent her this kid goat, but you couldn’t find her.”

24About three months later, Yehudah was told, “Tamar your daughter-in-law has been whoring. Actually, there: she’s pregnant through whoring.” Yehudah said, “Get her out so she can be burned.” 25As she was being got out, she sent to her father-in-law, “It is by the man to whom these belong that I’m pregnant,” and said, “Please recognize who is the one who owns the seal and the cord and the staff.” 26Yehudah recognized them. He said, “She is more faithful than me,[[105]](#footnote-105) because of the fact that I didn’t give her to my son *Ṧ*elah.” He didn’t sleep with her[[106]](#footnote-106) again.

27At the time of her giving birth, there – twins were in her womb. 28When she was giving birth, one put out a hand, and the midwife got a red thread and tied it on his hand, saying “This one got out first.” 29But as he was taking back his hand, his brother got out, and she said, “How you’ve broken out for yourself!” So they named him[[107]](#footnote-107) Pereṣ.[[108]](#footnote-108) 30Afterwards his brother, who had the red thread on his hand, got out. They named him Zeraḥ.[[109]](#footnote-109)

## Interpretation

This story within a story is a self-contained narrative about Jacob’s fourth son, who (the audience would likely know) will be the ancestor of the leading southern clan and of King David, and the places in the story (Adullam, Kezib/Akzib, Timnah, Enayim/Enam) are all in Judah. The story would thus have particular interest for Judahite listeners. “Judah’s lineage” is here “in jeopardy.”[[110]](#footnote-110) How did the sons of Tamar come to be the link between Judah and the clan descended from him? The answer is shocking. Judah’s three older brothers have already disgraced themselves one way or another, and now Judah, the fourth, does so, having already emerged not very creditably from Gen 37.[[111]](#footnote-111) The story would make listeners in Judah and in Ephraim/Samaria smirk in different ways. But Judah will play a key positive role in 43:3-10; 44:14-34,[[112]](#footnote-112) and will share prominence with Joseph in Gen 49, which anticipates the key position of Judah and Joseph in the southern and northern kingdoms. So how did it come about? Did he become a changed person?

At one level Gen 38 is a placeholder that fulfills a parallel function to 26:1-33 in Part Three of Genesis. It suggests the lapse of time between the opening of Part Four’s wider narrative in Gen 37 and the next stage in its story which will come in Gen 39. It raises suspense as we wonder what will happen to Joseph now: the narrator “leaves the anxious reader to cool his heels for thirty verses.”[[113]](#footnote-113) But it has a number of links with its context. It is another story of deception,[[114]](#footnote-114) though this time one of the brothers is the victim and he deserves it. The connection between this story and the context finds more concrete expression in some verbal ties. Judah is told to “examine” the seal, cord, and staff, and he indeed “examined them,” as Jacob was bidden to “examine” Joseph’s coat and “examined” them (37:32-33; 38:25-26). Jacob could not be consoled over his bereavement; Judah was consoled over his bereavement (37:35; 38:12). Judah “went down” to Adullam; Joseph was “made to go down” to Egypt (38:1; 39:1). Er and Onan do what is bad in Yahweh’s eyes, which in Onan’s case involves sex; Joseph refuses to do what would be bad and would be an offense against God in the realm of sex (38:7-10; 39:9). MT hints at these links by making Gen 38 only a section within Gen 38—40.[[115]](#footnote-115) It is part of the story of Jacob’s lines of descent (37:2); Jacob was prominent in Gen 37, and we don’t yet know that Joseph is going to be so prominent in the wider narrative as to make the chapter about Judah look out of place.

**38:1-5.** The note of time is vague; it might imply a moment soon after Joseph had arrived in Egypt, or a sequence of events that began some time before the events in Gen 37. Either way, Gen 38 covers more than a couple of decades, from Judah’s marriage to a time when his youngest son is grown up, so it covers at least a similar period to the story of Joseph’s down and up fortunes related in Gen 37—41.

Likewise the background to Judah’s going to Adullam (v. 1) is unspecified; perhaps he was simply finding pasturage for some of the family flock (cf. v. 12, and the comment on 37:29). Adullam was a Canaanite town (Josh 12:15; 15:35) a day’s journey northwest of Hebron or several days southwest of Bethel or Shechem, within a more populated area of Canaan in the lowlands between the mountain ridge and the coastal plain. There need be no implication that Judah had gone to live there semi-permanently nor that he had no business associating with Hirah, though the precedent in Gen 34 is not promising, and neither is the aftermath in this chapter. The reason for mentioning Adullam and Hirah will emerge in vv. 12-23.

“Getting” a Canaanite girl (vv. 2-5) is a different matter. Genesis has assumed that Abraham’s family should marry within the extended family. The verb “get” does imply marrying her; it is the regular expression for marriage (e.g., 11:29; 28:2, 6). But “seeing and getting” is a combination with unfortunate resonances (3:6; 6:2; 12:15; 34:2).[[116]](#footnote-116) Kezib (“deception”!) looks like a variant on Akzib (Josh 15:44); in a story such as this one, the name is significant.[[117]](#footnote-117) It is a town an hour or two southwest of Adullam; presumably Judah is pasturing there, too. Marrying the girl need not imply he lived with her (cf. Judg 15:1).

**38:6-11.** The story leaps forward fifteen or twenty years. Tamar is presumably another Canaanite from somewhere in the Adullam/Kezib area; Judah will later send her back to her father’s household, which suggests that she is not a member of Jacob’s clan. Judah’s getting a wife for Er need not imply that the couple had no say in the matter, only that Judah took the initiative as a father commonly would. But in this context, the idiom is telling: there is no reference to Tamar having a say in the marriage, or later in Onan’s having sex with her, nor in his sexual practice, or in her eventual return to her father’s household until Shelah is of age.

The information that Er was bad in Yahweh’s eyes (v. 7) might simply be an inference from his death at a young age. The narrator tells us nothing about how he died or how he was displeasing to Yahweh,[[118]](#footnote-118) and he might have died of what Western thinking would call bad luck and/or natural causes. Yet the narrative sees it as Yahweh making him die or letting him die in a more direct or specific sense than then applies, as narratives can make a distinction between a woman who simply gets pregnant or cannot get pregnant and a woman whose womb Yahweh opens or closes. But what Er did, and how Judah responded to his son’s death, are irrelevant to the story’s plot.

The convention behind Judah’s expectations of Onan (vv. 8-10) is a variant on the one expounded in Deut 25:5-10 and known in other traditional societies, though Judah does not require Onan actually to marry Tamar. Onan agrees to have sex on a number of occasions with Tamar and he thus looks as if he is fulfilling the obligation expected of him, but he practices coitus interruptus and thus avoids impregnating her (the term onanism for masturbation rests on a misunderstanding of the passage). His thinking likely parallels that of Mr. So-and-so in Ruth 4, who declines to be Ruth’s “restorer” because it will involve paying Naomi’s debts and imperiling his own family. If Er remains childless, Onan inherits his share of the family estate. If Onan impregnates Tamar, the child inherits the estate. His act is thus more cynical than that of Mr. So-and-so (who stood to lose from the estate he already possessed, not merely to forgo a prospective gain) and a less honest one, and he pays a more serious penalty than the shaming that So-and-so has to accept.

So Tamar will have to wait until Judah’s third son grows up (v. 11). It’s odd that Judah sends Tamar back to her father’s household; she is a member of Judah’s family now. The explanation lies in what follows, but there is an ellipse in the account of Judah’s words and logic. Really, he is hoping that the problem will simply go away. Indeed, there is more than one ellipse in his logic. He implies that his two sons’ deaths is somehow Tamar’s fault, whereas the narrator has made clear that it is theirs and God’s.[[119]](#footnote-119) “Judah is successful in protecting his son against contact with a ‘dangerous’ woman,”[[120]](#footnote-120) but he is not fulfilling his duty as father-in-law to Tamar as a member of his family. As the story unfolds, he makes one decision after another that takes him further and further away from the faithful lifestyle that one would like to expect.

**38:12-15.** Again time passes. Shelah has grown up and has not married Tamar. Judah has lost his wife; we never discover her name, as we never discover the name of Mr. So-and-so in Ruth. As there may be a slur on him because he declines to fulfill his obligation, so there may be a slur on her because she is a Canaanite, but again the basis for including or omitting information in the chapter is how it relates to the plot. But whether or not the report implies that Judah’s recourse to a whore is reprehensible, it does imply that it would have been reprehensible if his wife had still been alive.[[121]](#footnote-121) But she has died, and Judah’s time of mourning is over, and Judah is free to join in the sheep-shearing celebration (cf. 31:19). The shearing is evidently done by some experts, not by your everyday shepherds, but a shepherd naturally shows up to watch, and to join in the celebration. Timnah is another town in the lowlands, twenty miles north of Adullam and Kezib. It is lower in elevation (Samson goes “down” there: Judg 14:1), so “going up” does not refer to a literal climb but to going “up-country” (cf. 26:25).[[122]](#footnote-122)

Tamar needs to think about her future (vv. 13-14). She has seen Judah work out the implications of his fear for Shelah, reported in v. 11. His allegedly temporary sending of her back to her father’s family is clearly not temporary at all. His neglect means that she and Er will never having children and will thus have no one to continue their line and no one to inherit from Judah. While v. 8 has indicated Judah’s concern about Er, Tamar may also be concerned about herself and her own security. And she now moves from being someone who is acted on to being someone who takes action, like Naomi and Ruth. to showing herself someone characterized by “resistance and resilience”[[123]](#footnote-123) who “reverses her positon of powerlessness to one of power.”[[124]](#footnote-124) But in the circumstances, what options does she have?[[125]](#footnote-125) She will use her woman’s body (which as such is liable to abuse) as a means of finding justice.[[126]](#footnote-126) She will “stand on crooked and cut straight.”[[127]](#footnote-127) As is the case in some other traditional societies (including that of the other Tamar in 2 Sam 13), in her culture women dress in a way that indicates their marital status, and Tamar removes her widow’s garb. She then veils herself. The logic is not that a whore would veil herself; if anything the opposite would be true.[[128]](#footnote-128) But the veil would mean Judah could not recognize her, and he can therefore think in terms of her being sexually available to him. Enayim (“Eyes”) is likely the same place as Enam, in the same area (Josh 15:34), somewhere between Adullam and Timnah. When Judah meets Tamar there, his eyes will be closed in more than one sense, but Tamar will make the incident the means of opening them.[[129]](#footnote-129)

**38:15-19.** Judah is perhaps ready for some further comfort after his wife’s death, and the sheep-shearing festival may be an occasion when people indulged themselves one way or another. Yet his not having brought his credit card with him suggests that his recourse to a “whore” was not premeditated. The First Testament has firm rules prohibiting adultery and implying disapproval of sex between two single people, but neither sort of rule quite forbids the action of Judah and Tamar.[[130]](#footnote-130) It has no rule against a woman being in the sex trade or against a man paying for sex, and it can shrug its shoulders about it (e.g., Josh 2:1; Judg 16:1). While its predominant use of “whoring” as a metaphor for unfaithfulness to Yahweh does not indicate enthusiasm for it, Genesis is more concerned with Judah’s likely unwillingness to have sex with Tamar because he was still uncaring about his family obligations to her. In the social context it might have been just as acceptable for a father-in-law to beget a son on his dead son’s behalf as for a brother-in-law to do so.[[131]](#footnote-131) One principle here, which the First Testament elsewhere accepts with its explicit brother-in-law obligation (Deut 25:5-10) is that the protection of the family in the long term is at least as important as the protection of the individual; another may be that a family has an obligation to do what it can to enable a wife such as Tamar to become a mother.[[132]](#footnote-132) Tamar is manipulating Judah into doing what he should do.

The fee (vv. 16-18) seems large but the pledge seems larger; Judah’s “cavalier” attitude[[133]](#footnote-133) reminds one of Esau. Both surrendered something vital to their identity for a momentary satisfaction (and both married Canaanites). No wonder Judah is embarrassed in due course. A person’s seal, made of stone or metal, was a personal identifier worn on a cord around the neck and used for impressing on clay, in the manner of a signature. The staff is a less formal sign of a person’s status. Herodotus reports that a Babylonian carried a seal and a carved staff with a distinctive image.[[134]](#footnote-134) Seal and staff would function to guarantee that Judah came back with the goat to collect the pledges. For Tamar they are the items that will identify the man who had sex with her. The brisk sequence of verbs “he gave, he had sex, she became pregnant,” continued in “she set off, she went, she set aside,” recalls the brisk sequences in vv. 2-3 and in 34:2 in not-dissimilar contexts.

**38:20-23**. Events then mystify Judah, and the Judahite or Ephraimite audience grins some more. Does Judah get the Adullamite to do his work to avoid scandal? The narrator refers to Tamar simply as “the woman,” as if he is using the expression Judah would have used. “She is simply a woman with whom he had a tryst.”[[135]](#footnote-135) He of course does not know she is Tamar or his daughter-in-law.

The Adullamite (v. 21) now describes her as a hostess, a *qᵉdēšāh*. Etymologically this word suggests a holy woman, someone engaged in a ministry of some kind at a sanctuary. Applying the term to a woman engaged in the sex trade could imply someone with a role in a sanctuary involving sexual activity, such as an enacted prayer for fertility. So maybe there was a sanctuary at Enayim and maybe Adullam implies that the woman to whom Judah was in debt was such a person. The term might make his question more respectable in a Canaanite context, though not in a Torah-abiding Israelite context, where a Canaanite hierodule is indeed simply a whore (see the parallelism in Deut 23:17-18 [18-19]; Hos 4:14) or something worse (cf. *zônāh* in Gen 34:31).[[136]](#footnote-136) But it is hard to find evidence that “sacred prostitution” existed in Israel or elsewhere in the Middle East, and no hint in the context here that such a hierodule might be present and available to someone coming to the festival or that a regular whore might hang around at the sanctuary hoping for trade. More likely *qᵉdēšāh* is a more polite term for a woman who is sexually available outside the framework of regular community and familial life.[[137]](#footnote-137)

Either way (vv. 22-23), Judah doesn’t want the Adullamite to make ongoing enquiries in the town and make it look as if somehow a whore has made a fool of him and robbed him of key possessions.

**38:24-26** The truth now starts to come out. The scene is back home, wherever that is—somewhere such as Adullam or Kezib.

Getting pregnant (v. 24) is a hazard of being engaged in the sex trade, and the First Testament can also shrug its shoulders about that fact (1 Kings 3:16-28), though some shame attaches to being the offspring of a prostitute (Judg 11:1). But Tamar wanted to get pregnant. With some irony, once-off sex between her and Judah produces a pregnancy when regular sex with Er and Onan had never done so. At three months pregnancy starts being pretty certain, and soon afterwards it becomes hard to conceal (cf. Vg, which has the reporters describing Tamar as having an enlarged belly). If anything Tamar is interested in its becoming public, not in hiding it. So someone takes the news to Judah from the town where she lives in her father’s household, and Judah comes to the town. Is it his business because she has been betrothed to Shelah, or do her widow’s clothes mean she is still reckoned to be bound to Onan (in either case, despite her having gone back to her father’s household)? As well as not prohibiting prostitution, the Torah does not prescribe any punishment for it or describe any prostitute being punished. It does prescribe the burning of a man who has sex with a woman and also with her daughter, along with the burning of them, which is ironically close to what has happened in Gen 38, and it also prescribes the burning of a priest’s daughter who acts as a whore (Lev 20:14; 21:9). Hammurabi’s Code # 157 prescribes burning for having sex with one’s widowed mother.[[138]](#footnote-138) But such rules in Hammurabi and in the Torah are more like statements about theological ethics and social standards (ways of saying how bad such actions are) than rules for the elders at the town gate simply to implement, and Judah’s declaration with its “naked unreflective brutality”[[139]](#footnote-139) may not be intended literally. Nevertheless Judah is presupposing the common assumption that there is one standard for men and another for women.[[140]](#footnote-140)

So Tamar is brought out (v. 25), as a girl who is found not to have been a virgin when she married is to be brought out to the entrance of her father’s house for stoning, and as a couple who have sex when the girl is betrothed to someone else are to be brought out to the town gate for stoning (Deut 22:13-24). Tamar is got out to be exposed and at least shamed, but dramatically when all attention is on her and when Judah is there, the shaming turns out to work in another direction.

The account of Judah’s reaction (v. 26a) is compressed; it parallels the ellipse in v. 11. His initial words will be paralleled by David’s two-word acknowledgment “I have done wrong in relation to Yahweh” (2 Sam 12:13). Tamar is the faithful one (*ṣādᵉqāh*).[[141]](#footnote-141) Words related to this verb have earlier been translated by the words “faithful” and “faithfulness” (e.g., 6:9; 15:6; 18:19) and that connotation continues to apply here. In being willing to have sex with Onan and in waiting for Shelah, Tamar has been faithful to God’s expectations of a woman whose vocation is to build up the family of her and her husband, and she has thus been faithful to Er. But *ṣādēq* can have quasi-legal connotations, “to be acknowledged as faithful,” “to be in the right” (e.g., Isa 43:9, 26; Ps 51:4 [6]), and these connotations fits the present quasi-legal context where Judah has declared a quasi-legal judgment on Tamar. He thought he was in the right and she was in the wrong and he demanded her execution. But he has been exposed and shamed. The exposure and shaming do not relate to having recourse to a prostitute. Nor do they relate to having had sex with his daughter-in-law, which social convention would generally prohibit in a way that the Torah will in due course ratify (Lev 18:15). Having sex with Tamar was legitimate to the end that Tamar needs and Judah now acknowledges it and leaps to the recognition of Tamar’s being uniquely in the right. There is a further parallel in the David story as Nathan’s parable like Tamar’s acted parable will help David make the leap to acknowledging that he is in the wrong. The present story marks a stage in the development of Judah as a person “from someone who advocates for the sale of Joseph, to a man who later stands up as a substitute for his younger brother,” a transformation in which Tamar plays a key role.[[142]](#footnote-142)

The closing assurance that Judah did not sleep with Tamar again (v. 26b) might imply that that sleeping with her was an element in his guilt: although he did the right thing, it was for the wrong reason and/or I the wrong way, and he recognizes his wrongdoing and does something about it. In this sense he repents (*Jub* 41 makes his repentance more explicit), and here David’s action will not match Judah’s. But the reference to not sleeping with her again more directly presupposes that sleeping with his daughter-in-law was legitimate as a means of fulfilling a family obligation, even if it was irregular and it should have been Shelah who took this action. But Tamar will not need to allow anyone else to have sex with her unless she agrees to undertake another regular marriage. Perhaps the note indicates that Tamar was restored to her position in Judah’s family. We do not learn what now happened to her or about her ongoing relationship with her two sons and with Judah and with Judah’s family, though her son does appear in David’s genealogy in Ruth 4:18-22.

**38:27-30**. One might have thought that Genesis was not interested in the fruit of this shady union. Actually the theme of propagating a family is of key importance to the story.[[143]](#footnote-143) Indeed, the birth of the children is perhaps the validation of Judah’s declaration that Tamar is the faithful one.[[144]](#footnote-144) The account of birthing that closes the chapter forms no anticlimax for Judahites listening to this story.

First (v. 27), Tamar turns out to be someone like Rebekah (v. 27). Whereas she apparently didn’t have the troublesome pregnancy that Rebekah had, it transpires that she, too, is pregnant with twins. In her case it comes out only at the birth.

And her babies turn out to be like Esau and Jacob (vv. 28-30). During this birth, in a similar way to the earlier one, one of the twins stretches out his hand as they are born. If a baby threatens to emerge hand or foot first, the situation is mortally dangerous for babies and mother,[[145]](#footnote-145) but things turn out fine. The one who would have been designated the elder son puts out a hand, but then falls back and (as in the Rebekah story) the one who would have been the younger son pushes him out of the way. Yes, the breakout boy is rather like the heel-grabber.

## The Right Thing for the Wrong Reason

“Why did God and the Holy Spirit want to have these shameful and abominable matters written and preserved to be recounted and read in the church?... Who would believe that the teaching of such matters can be useful for the salvation and edification of the church?” Yet “examples of this kind are recounted to us for the purpose of teaching and consolation, and for the strengthening of our faith, in order that we may consider the immeasurable mercy of God, who has saved not only the righteous … but also the unrighteous.” The story gives the background to the fact that “Christ, then, participates in the blood of the Canaanites… in order that He may bear witness at the very beginning that He does not reject the Gentiles, whom He has received and has deigned to assume into His person.”[[146]](#footnote-146) The breakout boy turns out to be an ancestor of David (see Ruth 4:18-22; 1 Chron 2:1-17) and thus of Jesus (Matt 1:1-17).

The inclusion in Genesis of this chapter about Judah thus has a paradoxical effect. Ruth and 1 Chronicles belong in the Second Temple period so maybe anyone in the First Temple period listening to other stories that now appear in Genesis would be unaware of this juicy piece of information, but people listening in Second Temple times might know and might enjoy another grin.[[147]](#footnote-147) And if they had sneered at the Ammonites and Moabites as they listened to the story in 19:30-38, they would need to recognize that their sneers have come home to roost. The story reflects the importance of Judah’s clan yet it brings discredit on Judah. And in a paradoxical way it also brings glory to Jesus as the descendant of Judah who was willing to be born of and associated with this clan.[[148]](#footnote-148)

Perhaps it is Tamar’s appearance in Jesus’s genealogy that encourages Ephrem when he “reads Tamar as a heroine, perhaps even something of a holy fool, who eschews sexual mores in an effort to obtain the ‘blessing’ of Judah and thereby a role in the lineage of Christ.”[[149]](#footnote-149) The story is not explicit about her seeking to turn Judah around, but she does so. And thus the story also indicates that even someone like Judah who behaves in a faithless way can be turned around. “What seems the simple satisfaction of sexual hunger for Judah is, in fact, the redemption of his future.”[[150]](#footnote-150) And not just of his future, but of Tamar’s and of ours, even if he does unwittingly illustrate the awareness expressed by Thomas Becket in T. S. Eliot’s play *Murder in the Cathedral*:

*The last temptation is the greatest treason:*

*To do the right deed for the wrong reason.*

Judah does the right thing for the wrong reason, but God brings extraordinary fruit from his action, in his life, in Tamar’s, and in ours. Joseph’s later judgment about the way human wrongdoing can be Yahweh’s means of fulfilling his purpose (50:20) is already embodied in Yahweh’s working through Judah’s illegitimate marriage and his recourse to an apparent whore, and through Tamar’s deception.

# Genesis 39:1-20a—How Joseph Is Put in Jail, but Yahweh Is With Him

## Overview

Scene 2 in the Joseph story relates how Yahweh enables Joseph to do well in Potiphar’s household, but then he falls foul of the attentions of Potiphar’s wife and ends up in jail. Whereas Judah did the wrong thing and good came out of it, Joseph does the right thing and trouble comes out of it. Tamar used her sexuality one way; Potiphar’s wife uses her sexuality another way.

## Translation

1So Yosep had been taken down to Miṣrayim and Poṭipar, an official of Par’oh, the officer over the sentries, a Miṣrayite, had acquired him from the hand of the Yišma’elites who had taken him down there.

2But Yahweh was with Yosep and he became a successful individual. He came to be in the household of his Miṣrayite lord, 3and his lord saw that Yahweh was with him and that everything that he was doing, Yahweh was making succeed[[151]](#footnote-151) in his hand. 4So Yosep found favor in his eyes, and he attended on him. He appointed him over his household and put into his charge everything that belonged to him. 5From the time that he appointed him in his household and over everything that belonged to him, Yahweh blessed the Miṣrayite’s household on account of Yosep. Yahweh’s blessing was on everything that belonged to him, in the house and in the fields. 6He abandoned everything that he had into Yosep’s charge, and with him he did not acknowledge anything except the bread that he was eating.

Yosep became handsome in body and handsome in look, 7and subsequently[[152]](#footnote-152) his lord’s wife lifted her eyes to Yosep and said, “Do sleep with me.”[[153]](#footnote-153) 8But he refused. He said to his lord’s wife, “There, with me my lord doesn’t acknowledge what’s in the house, in that everything that belongs to him he has put in my charge. 9There’s no one bigger in this household than me. He hasn’t kept back from me anything except you, because you’re his wife. So how could I do this exceedingly bad thing and do wrong in relation to God?”[[154]](#footnote-154) 10When she spoke to Yosep day after day he didn’t listen to her by sleeping beside her, by being with her.

11But on this day[[155]](#footnote-155) he came into the house to do his work and none of the people of the household was there in the house. 12She caught hold of him by his coat saying “Do sleep with me.” He abandoned his coat in her hand, fled, and went outside. 13When she saw that he had abandoned his coat in her hand and fled outside, 14she called the people of the household and said to them, “Look,[[156]](#footnote-156) he brought us an ‘Ibrite man to play around with us! He came in to me[[157]](#footnote-157) in order to sleep with me and I called out in a loud voice.15When he heard that I raised my voice and called out, he abandoned his coat with me and fled, and went outside.”

16She put his coat down with her until his lord came home, 17and she spoke to him in the same words: “The ‘Ibrite servant that you brought to us came to me in order to play around with me. 18When I raised my voice and called out he abandoned his coat with me and fled outside.” 19When his lord heard[[158]](#footnote-158) the words that his wife spoke to him, “These are the very things that your servant did to me,” his anger blazed. 20Yosep’s lord got him and put him in the roundhouse,[[159]](#footnote-159) the place where the king’s prisoners were confined.

## Interpretation

The main story returns to Joseph, and moves back chronologically. It takes up the question raised at the end of Gen 37: what will happen to Joseph in Egypt, and specifically in the household of Pharaoh’s officer who is over the sentries? First he flourishes, but then disaster happens. The medieval chapter division follows MT in taking Gen 39:1-23 to comprise the second of three sections comprising Gen 38, 39, and 40, but actually 39:20b is the beginning of a another narrative sequence which repeats the sequence in 39:1-20a, so I treat the units as 39:1-20a and 39:20b—40:23.[[160]](#footnote-160)

39:1-20a: 39:20b—40:23:

so Joseph has been sold into servitude to Potiphar so Joseph has been put in jail by Potiphar

but Yahweh is with him but Yahweh is with him

making things succeed for him making things succeed for him

thus he proves to be an able head of the household thus he proves to be an able head of the jail

subsequently he impresses Potiphar’s wife subsequently he impresses Pharaoh’s officer

but she betrays him but he lets him down

and Joseph ends up in jail and Joseph ends up stuck in jail

Gen 37 had the shape of tragedy: whereas there seemed no reason why the future should not work out well for Jacob and his line, through Joseph’s sharing his dreams and his brothers’ reaction, Jacob’s story fell apart, the family came to be sullied by conflict and deceit, and Joseph ended up in exile and in servitude. At first it looks as if 39:1-20a will have more the shape of comedy as it takes Joseph from servitude to success. But the “comedic” plot does not reach resolution; Joseph is successful but is still an exile in servitude. Even the impression that things have turned a corner is false; the movement of the story continues to be downward. But the key role played by the fact that Yahweh was with Joseph provides a basis for hoping that exile, servitude, and imprisonment may be reversed. For Judahites in exile or in dispersion, not least in Egypt, a story about the possibility of being faithful yet successful could be an inspiration.[[161]](#footnote-161) Gen 39:1—41:57 will in fact portray the varied possible experiences of someone who becomes hostage to the empire. One might become its victim (39:1-20a). One might be let down (39:20b—40:23). But one might eventually triumph (41:1-57).

**39:1.** The opening verse makes for a parallel with 38:1: Joseph goes down (*yārad*)as Judah did, though Joseph does so involuntarily—he is made to go down. It more systematically resumes from Gen 37 after the interscene in Gen 38. The double reference to Joseph being “taken down” also picks up the use of that verb in 37:25 in connection with the Ishmaelites. To them, Joseph had been just another piece of cargo. The point is underlined by the reference to his becoming simply something that Potiphar “acquired.” Conversely, there is a slight slur involved in referring to someone important like Potiphar as “a certain Egyptian” (*’îš miṣrî*).

**39:2-6a**. Little has prepared the audience for the turnaround in Joseph’s fortunes which now follows, though it does parallel his father’s experience when he took flight from Esau. It is a total turn around: everything, everything, everything, everything, everything (vv. 3-6a). First he comes to be working in the house rather than outside (v. 2), then he does well in his work in the house and comes to be working for Potiphar personally (vv. 3-4a), then he is appointed over the affairs of the entire household and Yahweh blesses the household and matters outside it (vv. 4b-5), so that the final result is that Potiphar leaves everything to Joseph (v. 6a).

Yahweh is “with” Joseph, and it is something Potiphar can see (vv. 2-3). It is an objective fact which makes a difference to a person’s outward circumstances. The result is spelled out in terms of success. Four times Abraham’s servant had referred to Yahweh making him successful in his commission to find a wife for Isaac (Gen 24:21, 40, 42, 56); three times this chapter refers to Joseph’s success on a broader front. It seems that originally Joseph worked outside but then Potiphar brought him into the work inside the house,[[162]](#footnote-162) but it will be his undoing. Presumably his initial work involved menial chores, but he shows his potential in the way he accomplishes them.

Speedy promotion follows (v. 4). Though “found favor” can imply something inexplicable (as is suggested by the traditional translation “found grace”), Potiphar’s favor is quite explicable, though the phrase nevertheless implies something astonishing, in the circumstances. So Joseph becomes personal assistant to Potiphar: “attend on” (*šārat*) will describe Joshua’s position in relation to Moses and Elisha’s in relation to Elijah (Exod 24:13; 1 Kings 19:21). A man like Potiphar will possess quite an estate, and Joseph comes to be in charge of the estate as well as the house.

And Potiphar experiences the results of Yahweh’s being with Joseph (vv. 5-6a). There is a contrast between saying that Yahweh was with Joseph and that Yahweh blessed Pharaoh:[[163]](#footnote-163) while the former implies a personal relationship, the latter implies things going well in the concrete realities of life. It is the first and only time in Genesis that Yahweh blesses people outside Abraham’s family, if we count Laban as within the family (see 30:27, 30)—though there is a parallel between Jacob bringing blessing to Laban and Joseph bringing blessing to Potiphar,[[164]](#footnote-164) and with things going wrong later. But Joseph’s doing so is in keeping with the recurrent references in Genesis to blessing coming to the nations through Abraham and his family, so that the idea that blessing comes to the Egyptians on account of Joseph is significant. “In every place in which the righteous go, a blessing goes along with them” (*GenR* 86:6). Potiphar’s abandoning (*‘āzab*) concern with anything into Joseph’s hand or charge, as opposed to merely putting this concern into Joseph’s hand or charge (vv. 4, 8) testifies to the quality of Joseph’s work, though in light of what follows in vv. 6b-10 it raises the question whether he is being irresponsible and would in particular have been wise to pay attention to his wife’s needs as well as his stomach’s needs. Perhaps he needed to keep an eye on the kitchen because “the Egyptians could not eat a meal with the Hebrews because this would be an offense to Egyptians” (43:32). Hands will continue to be a key motif in this story (vv. 1, 3, 4, 6, 8, 12, 13): Joseph’s fate lies in his hand and in the hand of other people.[[165]](#footnote-165)

**39:6b-10**. There now begins the long account of how things go wrong for Joseph, paralleling the account in Gen 37, which 39:1 summarized.

Joseph has inherited his mother’s looks (vv. 6b-7): compare 29:17. He is growing into a handsome young man and Potiphar’s wife (Zuleika, according to later tradition)[[166]](#footnote-166) eventually notices and pays attention. Prov 1—9 frequently warns young men about the possibility of being seduced by another man’s wife (e.g., 2:16-19; 5:1-23; 60:20-35; 7:1-27). It is a pressure that a young man with average hormones might find hard to resist.[[167]](#footnote-167) Joseph (who is now nineteen or twenty or so) might have been expected to yield to the blandishments of Potiphar’s wife—in which case the story might have worked out in a different way (or might not). In Proverbs and here, there may be other pieces of background to what happens. “Subsequently” presumably denotes Potiphar’s abandoning all responsibility in the household to Joseph—including his wife. Perhaps she consequently had a sense of being neglected and of longing for a relationship with a man. If Joseph had not been handsome, or if Potiphar had been paying attention, or if his wife had not been lonely…. Perhaps all three conditions were fulfilled. Do “Potiphar’s wife and Tamar provide two models of the feminine”: one sensual, verbally aggressive, tempting, the other a marginal figure who turns the weakness of her position into a source of strength?[[168]](#footnote-168) Yet Genesis makes no comment on the woman’s attractiveness. Further, an audience that knew that the word for official (*sārîs*) also meant “eunuch” might have allowed itself a sardonic grin: what would you expect of the poor woman (and how stupid was Potiphar leaving a handsome young man alone with her in the house)? In her situation and need, is his wife so different from Tamar?[[169]](#footnote-169) Western readers would be inclined to assume she is interested in sex for sex’s sake, but sex for sex’s sake was a less realistic hope for a woman before the development of modern methods of birth control; sex was tied up with having a baby.[[170]](#footnote-170) Genesis itself rather draws attention to the power differential between her and Joseph.[[171]](#footnote-171) It refers to her only as “his lord’s wife”; it never names her. The incident presupposes the way sex and power get mixed up. Usually the dynamic involves a man possessing the power and being in a position to force himself on a women, but on this occasion the woman possesses the power and thinks she can use it to her sexual advantage.

Though handsome in body, Joseph was even more handsome in character (vv. 8-9).[[172]](#footnote-172) If he was an egotistical teenager in Gen 37, he has come a long way.[[173]](#footnote-173) His rationale for resistance is threefold (is he partly trying to bolster his own commitment?).[[174]](#footnote-174) First, there is a relationship of trust between him and his master which he cannot betray. Second, having sex with Potiphar’s wife would be something very bad; it is a common evaluation of adultery in the Middle East. And third, it would involve doing wrong against God or offending God or falling short of God’s expectations. The description of adultery as a terrible thing, especially when it involved betraying one’s relationship with someone, recurs in the Egyptian “Story of Two Brothers” from about the time of Moses, where a young man resists the advances of his sister-in-law who then accuses him of making advances on her.[[175]](#footnote-175)

Potiphar’s wife perhaps moderates her pleas: won’t he just sleep beside her? (v. 10).[[176]](#footnote-176) Even that act of companionship would be a comfort. If he could just be with her.... Perhaps Joseph knows that neither he nor she could be expected to let things stop there.

**39:11-15.** But a day comes when the coast is clear. Grabbing him by his garment perhaps implies trying to pull it off. The garment might be more like a coat or more like a shirt, though either way it would likely mean that running out of the house would look odd if not incriminating. It was doubtless an instinctive, apparently wise reaction in a context of temptation, but with hindsight it might have seemed unwise in its own way. “Joseph’s flight not only enrages but also compromises his mistress.”[[177]](#footnote-177)

And his continuing resistance issues (vv. 13-15) in another illustration of the volatility of one-sided sexual relationships (cf. Gen 34; 2 Sam 13). Potiphar’s wife’s introduction of reference to her husband without naming him and with the implication that he is to blame for what has (not) happened reinforces the suspicion that he has been neglecting her. The term Ibrite/Hebrew recurs from 14:13,[[178]](#footnote-178) more explicitly illustrating the way it commonly occurs on the lips of people outside Israel, often as something of a slur. It designates him as a foreigner, as the “other.”[[179]](#footnote-179) Her talk of Joseph’s “playing around” also make for a comparison with Sarah’s pejorative comment about Ishmael (21:9) and of with the narrator’s description of Isaac and Rebekah (26:8), where the verb is a euphemism for sexual play; the occurrences of the verb here in vv. 14-17 are the last two of the eleven in Genesis (there are only two elsewhere in the First Testament, in Exod 32:6; Judg 16:25). There is a lot of play in Genesis.

**39:16-20a**. The version of her accusation that Potiphar’s wife gives her husband is the third account of her encounter with Joseph, following one by the narrator in vv. 10-12 and one by her to the servants in vv. 14-15. Such repetitions and recapitulations run through the Joseph story[[180]](#footnote-180) as they have featured earlier in Genesis. The contrast between her accounts and the narrator’s account underscores the blatancy of her lie.[[181]](#footnote-181) She again says he left his garment “with” her not “in her hand,” which would be incriminating.[[182]](#footnote-182) Her second account is more diplomatic than her first—she doesn’t speak as if Potiphar had deliberately brought Joseph to cause trouble. Her description of Joseph is more disparaging: in v. 14 he was a Hebrew, a foreigner, someone who is not one of us, now he is also a mere servant.

Joseph’s punishment (v. 20a) is surprising. Jail is not a common form of punishment in traditional societies as it is in Western societies, though it may have been more common in Egypt than elsewhere in the Middle East.[[183]](#footnote-183) In both contexts it is a punishment for offences against the state (so it is the king’s prisoners who are in the prison), and traditional societies, where the state is less important than it is in Western societies and there is less of a state structure, are less inclined to see wrongdoing as an offence against the state. Joseph’s objections to adultery do not see it as an offence against the state. The Torah will later see rape and adultery as offences for which someone should pay with his life, and Proverbs warns young men such as Joseph that they may pay for adultery with their lives. So one would not have been surprised if a powerful man such as Potiphar had imposed a severe punishment on Joseph. According to the first-century Greek historian Diodorus Siculus, Egyptian law prescribed that a man who violated a free married woman should be castrated,[[184]](#footnote-184) though actual practice in Egypt was rather different and usually less drastic,[[185]](#footnote-185) as it was in Israel. Potiphar’s failure to impose a severe punishment might raise the question whether he believes his wife’s story[[186]](#footnote-186) and raise the possibility that he was angry with her and/or with himself for whatever might have happened, while continuing to appreciate Joseph for what he had seen earlier. Maybe the lightness of his punishment is just another fruit of the fact that Yahweh is with Joseph.[[187]](#footnote-187)

## Yahweh Was With Joseph

Both Testaments show how God has various ways of relating to the world and to people and how he adopts different ways at different times and with different people. While Yahweh does not appear or speak to Joseph as he does to Abimelek, Jacob, and Laban (20:3-7; 28:13; 31:10-13, 24; 46:3-4), both Joseph himself and the narrator refer to Yahweh’s being involved in Joseph’s life. To describe this involvement, a distinctive motif in Gen 39 is the declaration that Yahweh was “with” Joseph (vv. 2, 21, 23). The narrator reports it and both Potiphar and the jailor can see it. So by implication can Pharaoh later, though he does not use the expression; instead, his distinctive observation is that God’s spirit is in Joseph. God’s being with Joseph is the key factor in his move from servitude and from imprisonment to freedom and success. God’s spirit being in him is the key factor in his being able to interpret Pharaoh’s dreams and to offer advice on action to take in light of them.

While the report that Yahweh was with Joseph recalls declarations Yahweh made to Isaac and Jacob and recalls testimonies given by them or by witnesses (26:3, 24, 28; 28:15, 20; 31:3, 5; 35:3), the two stories in 39:1—40:23 are the first where the narrator makes the comment. The declaration is the “theological entrance piece to the Joseph story.”[[188]](#footnote-188) As William Tyndale translated 39:2, “the Lord was with Joseph and he was a lucky fellow.” As was the case with Isaac and Jacob, Yahweh being “with” him does not refer to an internal awareness of that presence. Nor does it refer to the sense in which Yahweh was objectively with Joseph when he was trapped in the cistern or in the midst of being transported to Egypt. Yahweh being with him meant Yahweh protected and blessed (beyond Genesis, see Josh 6:27; Judg 1:19, 22; 2:18; 1 Sam 3:19; 18:12, 14, 28; 2 Kings 18:7; 1 Chron 9:20; 17:3; 2 Chron 1:1; 15:9). “Nothing… was less probable than that the family of Jacob should be preserved by his means, when he was cut off from it, and carried far away, and not even reckoned among the living.”[[189]](#footnote-189) But Yahweh was with him to that end.

The expression in Genesis is “Yahweh was with him” not “God was with him” (this phrase comes only in 21:20—significantly, applied to Ishmael). Gen 37 did not refer to Yahweh or God; explicit reference to Yahweh’s presence and action did feature in Gen 38, though not in an encouraging way. There are eight occurrences of the name Yahweh in Gen 39; in the whole of Gen 40—50 there will be only one more (49:18).[[190]](#footnote-190) While the presence and activity of the God of Israel stands over Gen 37—50 as a whole, after Gen 39 the narrative has Joseph use the more general word for God in the way that would seem less odd to an Egyptian and on the lips of a quasi-Egyptian (e.g., 40:8, 41:16). It also retains that manner of speech for conversations within the family (e.g., 42:28; 45:5-9) and in due course for the narrator’s own statements and for God’s statements (46:2-3), and into Exod 1—2. This way of speaking corresponds more closely to the way Abraham’s descendants would actually speak, before Yahweh revealed his name to Moses. By default, it prepares the way for Yahweh’s sharing of his name in Exod 3.

Genesis does not offer any analysis of how Yahweh’s being with someone makes things happen. It perhaps implies that things happen in large part by circumstances working together so that (for instance) Joseph has opportunity to show the kind of person that Yahweh made him (but how does Potiphar know it is because Yahweh was with him?). Yet that formulation only restates the question: how does Yahweh make things work together in that way? The chapters that follow will show how Yahweh also acts via the good and bad human decisions that people take, but they will not attempt to explain how that works.[[191]](#footnote-191)

# Genesis 39:20b—40:23— How Joseph Comes to Be a Dream Interpreter

## Overview

Scene 3 relates how Joseph again does well in a situation of adversity. When two victims of Pharaoh’s wrath join him in prison, he is able to interpret dreams that they have, which are similar yet forecast reinstatement for one and execution for the other. But the man who is reinstated fails to put in a good word with Pharaoh on Joseph’s behalf. Thus the pattern of the story parallels that of Scene 2 (and Scene 1). Will things ever go right for Joseph?

## Translation

20bSo he was there in the roundhouse. 21But Yahweh was with Yosep and he extended commitment to him, and gave favor towards him[[192]](#footnote-192) in the eyes of the roundhouse officer. 22The roundhouse officer gave into Yosep’s charge all the prisoners who were in the roundhouse. Everything that they were doing there, he was the one doing it. 23The roundhouse officer didn’t look at any matter in his charge, because Yahweh was with him, and whatever he was doing Yahweh was making succeed.

1Subsequently,[[193]](#footnote-193) the king of Miṣrayim’s butler and the baker did wrong in relation to their lord, the king of Miṣrayim. 2Par‘oh was irate with his two officials, the officer over the butlers and the officer over the bakers, 3and he put them under guard in the house of the officer over the sentries, in the roundhouse, the place where Yosep was confined. 4The officer over the sentries appointed Yosep with them, and he attended on them.

They were some time under guard, 5and the two of them had a dream, each his own dream, in one night, each according to the interpretation of his dream—the king of Miṣrayim’s butler and baker who were confined in the roundhouse. 6Yosep came to them in the morning and saw that they were vexed. 7He asked Par‘oh’s officials who were with him under guard in his lord’s house, “Why are your faces grim today?” 8They said to him, “We’ve had a dream, and there’s no one to interpret it.” Yosep said to them, “Interpretations belong to God, don’t they. Tell me, please.”

9So the officer over the butlers told Yosep his dream. He said to him, “In my dream: there, a vine before me. 10On the vine, three branches. As it was budding, its blossom grew and its clusters ripened as grapes. 11Par‘oh’s cup was in my hand, and I got the grapes, pressed them into Par‘oh’s cup, and put the cup into Par‘oh’s grasp.” 12Yosep said to him, “This is its interpretation. The three branches are three days. 13In yet three days, Par‘oh will lift up your head and put you back in your position. You’ll put Par‘oh’s cup in his hand in accordance with the former rule when you were his butler. 14Only[[194]](#footnote-194) you will have been mindful of me with you when things are good for you and you will act in commitment with me, please, and have Pharaoh be mindful of me,[[195]](#footnote-195) and get me out of this house. 15Because I was actually stolen[[196]](#footnote-196) from the country of the ‘Ibrites, and also I’ve done nothing here that they should have put me in the cistern.”

16The officer over the bakers saw that the interpretation was good. He said to Yosep, “In my dream, also: there, three baskets of white pastry[[197]](#footnote-197) on my head. 17In the top basket, all kinds of food for Par‘oh, a baker’s work. But the birds were eating it from the basket, from on my head.” 18Yosep answered, “This is the interpretation. The three baskets are three days. 19In yet three days, Par‘oh will lift up your head from on you and impale you on a tree, and the birds will eat your flesh from on you.”

20On the third day, Par‘oh’s birthday, he made a banquet for all his servants, and lifted up the head of the officer over the butlers and the head of the officer over the bakers, among his servants. 21He put the officer over the butlers back into his butler’s position, and he put the cup in Par‘oh’s grasp, 22and the officer over the bakers he impaled, as Yosep had interpreted to them. 23But the officer over the butlers was not mindful of Yosep. He disregarded him.

## Interpretation

Scene 3 follows the pattern of Scene 2, so that throughout Gen 38—40 the account of Jacob’s lines of descent stands still—at best. Once again Yahweh makes it possible for Joseph to flourish in a situation of adversity, and the arrival of two of Pharaoh’s staff in the prison and their having dreams gives further opportunity for it to be shown that Yahweh is with Joseph—though he expresses it in terms of God being with him, or more precisely of God enabling him to interpret the dreams. So Joseph is successful but he is still an exile, in prison; indeed, it’s worse to be in Pharaoh’s prison than to be in Potiphar’s service. But one of the men is released in fulfillment of his dream as interpreted by Joseph, which ought to have opened up the way for Joseph’s release. However, it doesn’t. “The turning-point of Joseph’s fortunes begins,”[[198]](#footnote-198) though one would not have guessed so at the end of the chapter as things seem to be miscarrying again. Thus once again Genesis sets alongside each other the wonder of Yahweh’s presence with the flourishing that follows, and the letdown when things miscarry. It honors both realities.

**39:20b-23.** Joseph moves from one confinement (a hole in the ground, Gen 37) to another confinement and from one house (Potiphar’s) to another house.[[199]](#footnote-199) The narrative thus summarizes the situation in a way that parallels 39:1.

It then goes on (v. 21) to the vital second statement that corresponds to 39:2: Yahweh was with Joseph. So the answer to the question “where is Joseph’s God now, to liberate and rescue him?”[[200]](#footnote-200) is, he’s watching keenly as Joseph goes through one of the experiences that Joseph will later describe as meant by human beings to do something bad but meant by God to do something good (50:20-21), and/or to help shape your character.[[201]](#footnote-201) “God, before he opened the door for his servant’s deliverance, entered into the very prison to sustain him with his strength.”[[202]](#footnote-202) But the practical implications of Yahweh’s being with him are spelled out in the reference to Yahweh’s commitment and then in the further reference to Joseph finding favor, but in the parallelism of the two narratives in 39:1-20a and 39:20b—40:23 the second version heightens the first: Yahweh “extends” commitment to him (like someone extending a hand or extending a tent: it is a rare expression), and Yahweh gives the favor with the “roundhouse officer,” the prison guard. In LXX and Vg the replacement of the name Yahweh by the word for “Lord” makes for a nice contrast: “the lord [i.e., Potiphar]… threw him into prison” but “the Lord was with Joseph” there.[[203]](#footnote-203)

In a further heightened parallel (vv. 22-23), as Potiphar put into Joseph’s hand *everything* in his household, the prison guard puts into Joseph’s hand *everyone* in the prison as well as all the tasks that needed to be undertaken there. Potiphar had not felt the need to look into anything that Joseph was doing; so it is with the prison guard. As happened earlier, the narrative repeats the declaration that Yahweh was with Joseph. “Christ comes and lights up hell with gracious eyes.”[[204]](#footnote-204) Then Genesis likewise makes another reference to Yahweh granting success to everything that Joseph was doing, which completes the parallelism with the opening statement of this point in v. 2. So where will we go from here? The MT paragraph division and the medieval chapter division which associate vv. 20b-23 with what precedes make for an interim happy ending, but alas, the parallelism continues in 40:1-23.

**40:1-4a.** Its continuation is signaled by the “subsequently” (cf. 39:7).[[205]](#footnote-205) Again there is no indication of how much time has elapsed. The terms that etymologically signify “butler” (more literally, one who gives someone a drink) and “baker” suggest more exalted roles than those words imply, the reverse of the situation with the word for sentries in 37:36[[206]](#footnote-206) which recurs here in vv. 3-4. Nehemiah was the emperor’s butler (Neh 1:11) and his promotion to governor suggests he was more than a wine waiter. The linguistic usage compares with the use in English of terms such as chamberlain or purser or bursar whose meaning is unrelated to their etymology. It seems likely that butler and baker are responsible members of Pharaoh’s staff, which would mean positions of power, temptation, and danger. There’s no indication of the nature of the two men’s (alleged) wrongdoing, though the use of the verb *ḥāṭā’* (the verb Joseph used in 39:9) suggests we are not to think of something trivial to which the king is overreacting. TgPsJ explains that they were suspected of seeking to poison Pharaoh (the butler was then vindicated). It is perhaps because they are more than butler and baker that they get a trustee to serve them. Apparently the roundhouse under its guard is attached to the house of the officer over the sentries and responsible to him,[[207]](#footnote-207) and the imprisonment might be more like house arrest, though in v. 15 Joseph still calls it a cistern or dungeon. It would make sense if the two men were put under guard while Pharaoh decided what to do next.[[208]](#footnote-208) The omission of the name of the officer over the sentries might indicate that the person has changed and that it is no longer Potiphar, which would fit with his apparently treating Joseph as a trustee.

**40:4b-8**. Again there is no indication how much time has elapsed until one night the two men both have dreams that are evidently significant but not of self-evident meaning. They need interpreting. The narrative keeps us in suspense about the content of the dreams, and builds suspense by the way it characterizes them: one night, two important people, two significant dreams, but two dreams with different meaning, “each according to the interpretation of his dream.” Within the First Testament, the Hebrew terms for “interpretation” and “interpret” (*pitrôn*, *pātar*) come only in Gen 40—41, though related terms are frequent in Daniel and elsewhere, especially in Qumran writings.[[209]](#footnote-209) Genesis and Daniel both testify to special revelations from God, and to the capacity of individuals to perceive things about the future, Whereas English is more inclined to distinguish between the ascertaining of meaning and the meaning that is ascertained, the Hebrew expressions cover both the process of interpretation and the interpretation that results, and the use of the expressions can move between these significances. The point in v. 5 is thus that each of the dreams has a different meaning.

The prisoners themselves then refer to the process of interpretation (v. 8) though Joseph’s response concerns the fact that the meaning of significant dreams belongs to God, as the one who sends them—not that the process of interpretation belongs to God, though that would also follow. Egyptians were used to the idea of revelations coming in the form of dreams that might need interpretation,[[210]](#footnote-210) and if they were not in confinement the two officers might know where to go for interpretation. It is thus perhaps at least as much the lack of an interpreter as the occurrence of the dreams that troubles the men. While Genesis has referred to a number of significant dreams (20:3-7; 28:12-17; 31:10-11, 24; 37:5-9), their meaning was clear; none required much interpretation. The dreams in Gen 40—42 and in Daniel do require interpretation. Joseph himself having his symbolic dreams has hardly prepared us for the idea that he can interpret dreams or has special access to God that would enable him to do so. The boldness of his invitation to the two dreamers thus compares with Daniel’s boldness in Dan 1—2 (the setting of Daniel is centuries later than that of Joseph, so an obvious inference is that the Daniel stories have taken up motifs from the Joseph story; uncertainty about dating Genesis complicates that subject but comparing the two without making any assumptions about relative dating is still illuminating).[[211]](#footnote-211) There Daniel without any divine guidance asks the Babylonian official to test them to show whether they will flourish on a non-defiling diet, and then undertakes to provide Nebuchadnezzar with the interpretation of his dream and only afterwards thinks to pray about the matter. As the Daniel story has a significant background in Daniel and his friends’ location in Babylon, so the Joseph story has a significant background in Joseph’s being in Egypt. There, as in Babylon and as in the Western world, the interpretation of dreams is a scientific procedure in the sense that it works on the basis of an accumulated corpus of data possessed by the culture. Like Daniel, Joseph dismisses this approach to interpretation. The key to interpretation is not professional expertise but contact with God. Interpretation involves divine revelation not scientific reasoning. It is admittedly “a pious disclaimer but not exactly a modest one.”[[212]](#footnote-212) Like Daniel, Joseph implicitly claims to be in touch with the God who grants such revelation. This ridiculous claim would arouse scorn from the two royal ministers if they were outside with their usual access to resources, but here they have no alternative to taking a chance on their lowly Hebrew duty officer.[[213]](#footnote-213)

**40:9-15**. The dream indicates that “butler” is not merely a theoretical or honorary title, as it was not for Nehemiah. As will again be the case in Gen 41, Joseph “chooses” which elements in the dream to comment on. He does not treat the dream as an allegory. His interpretation does not issue from the application of a method but from intuitive discernment or divine gift. “Lifting up the head” is not very different from the more common expression lifting up the face (e.g., 32:20 [21]), whether one lifts one’s own or someone else lifts it: it suggests holding one’s head high or having someone else enable one to do so.[[214]](#footnote-214) Here the less common expression (for which cf. 2 Kings 25:27) opens up the possibility of the horrifying double entendre that will follow in v. 19.

Asking for a favor in return for the act of interpretation (vv. 14-15) would hardly surprise or offend the butler; priests, pastors, interpreters, diviners, and prophets get paid. We didn’t hear anything of Joseph’s feelings or protests in Gen 37, but now we do; and it transpires that even though Joseph is gifted as a dreamer and interpreter, he will need the initiative of other people in order to find freedom and see his own dreams come true.[[215]](#footnote-215) His request makes more explicit that the butler was indeed not merely a wine waiter, again like Nehemiah. He could speak to Pharaoh on Joseph’s behalf. While Joseph’s capacity to interpret dreams will be of ongoing significance in Gen 37—50, this possibility is the immediate reason why Joseph’s capacity is of significance. There is a “pathos” about Joseph here. He’s a Hebrew. He was “stolen,” an expression that was not used before, and another example of the way the retelling of an event can incorporate a different way of describing it. His reference to a cistern draws attention to the similarity between his experience in Egypt and the experience that had brought him there. “The man who seems to be quite in control is here needful.” He uses some key First Testament words in his plea. He asks for the butler to remember and be mindful (*zākar*) and asks for commitment on his part (*ḥesed*)—which Daniel experienced from a royal official (Dan 1:9). He thus asks for mindfulness and for *ḥesed* not from God but from a fellow-prisoner (contrast 30:22; 39:21).[[216]](#footnote-216)

**40:16-19**. Again the dream fits the fact that the dreamer is a baker; the Egyptian dictionary lists 38 varieties of cake and 57 varieties of bread.[[217]](#footnote-217) But “any normal man would have interpreted these very similar dreams similarly. Joseph, however, shows his great skill by discerning their quite opposite meanings.”[[218]](#footnote-218) Lifting up the head now becomes a negative action. Joseph describes the head baker’s fate in a way designed to bring home its gruesomeness to people listening to the story. The interpretation implies not merely punishment but execution, not merely regular execution but beheading, and not merely beheading but impaling, which facilitates the birds’ work. While impaling shames a person and acts as a disincentive to people’s repeating the victim’s offense, the comment about the birds suggests that is also designed to ensure that the punishment continues after death. It means there will not be enough of the victim to bury and he will not be able to rest with his ancestors in the family tomb; hence the ceiling on the period of impaling in Deut 21:22-23; Josh 10:26-27, and the merciful action of the Yabeshites in 1 Sam 31:8-13. The dream’s meaning is thus horrifying, though the narrator makes no comment on Joseph’s reaction or on the baker’s reaction. The story’s interest lies in what follows.

**40:20-23**. It was Pharaoh who put the two officers into the roundhouse, and it is Pharaoh who can take them out. He operates a little like a president with power to pardon anyone. The narrator reports what happens with a repetition of Joseph’s sardonic conceit. Pharaoh lifts the head of both of his officers, in different ways but in fulfillment of Joseph’s different interpretations of the dreams. Has Pharaoh made inquiries and concluded that one man is guilty and the other innocent? Again the narrator reports things briskly without comment in order to move onto what matters from the point of view of the story. Instead of remembering there was forgetting. And to forget injustices is “to participate in the sin of the chief cupbearer” and it is “the most injurious that a people can commit.”[[219]](#footnote-219) Like 39:1-20a, this section has got Joseph nowhere. But fortunately it is not the end of the story. “You may have forgotten him, but I have not forgotten him” (*GenR* 88:7).

# Genesis 41:1-56— How Joseph Comes to be Supplies Master in Egypt

## Overview

Once again there is a pair of dreams that need interpreting, once again Joseph can interpret them. This time Pharaoh is the dreamer and the dreams relate to national affairs—they lay out the prospect of flourishing but then of famine, and Joseph also suggests the action needed to manage this sequence. His ability to interpret the dreams leads to the lifting up of his head in the positive sense. It takes him from being a prisoner to being Pharaoh’s agent in implementing the action he has suggested. Pharaoh provides him with a wife and they have children who will be the ancestors of two of the Israelite clans, Manasseh and Ephraim.

## Translation

1At the end of two full years,[[220]](#footnote-220) Par‘oh himself was dreaming, and there, he was standing by the Ye’or.[[221]](#footnote-221) 2There, from the Ye’or seven cows going up, lovely in appearance and sturdy in body, and they grazed among the reeds.[[222]](#footnote-222) 3And there: seven more cows going up from the Ye’or after them, bad in appearance and thin in body, and they stood beside the cows on the bank of the Ye’or. 4The cows that were bad in appearance and thin in body ate the seven cows that were lovely in appearance and sturdy.

Par‘oh woke up, 5but went to sleep, and dreamed a second time. There: seven ears of wheat going up on a single stalk, sturdy and good. 6And there: seven ears that were thin and scorched by the east wind springing up after them. 7The thin ears swallowed the seven sturdy, full ears.

Par‘oh woke up. There: it was a dream. 8In the morning his spirit was agitated and he sent and called for all Miṣrayim’s diviners,[[223]](#footnote-223) all its experts.[[224]](#footnote-224) Par‘oh told them his dream, but no one could interpret them for Par‘oh.

9Then the officer over the butlers spoke with Par‘oh: “My wrongdoings I am going to be mindful[[225]](#footnote-225) of today. 10When Par‘oh was irate with his servants, he put me under guard in the house of the officer over the sentries, me and the officer over the bakers. 11We had a dream, I and he, in one night. Each in accordance with the interpretation of his dream, we dreamed. 12With us there was an ‘Ibrite boy, a servant of the officer over the sentries. We told him and he interpreted our dreams to us. Each in accordance with his dream, he interpreted. 13As he interpreted it to us, so it came about. Me, he put back into my position; him, he impaled.”[[226]](#footnote-226)

14So Par‘oh sent and called for Yosep, they hurried him from the cistern, he shaved and changed his clothes, and he came to Par‘oh. 15Par‘oh said to Yosep, “I had a dream and there is no one to interpret it. I myself have heard about you, that you can listen to a dream so as to interpret it.” 16Yosep answered Par‘oh, “Not me at all.[[227]](#footnote-227) God is the one who will aver[[228]](#footnote-228) Par‘oh’s well-being.”

17So Par‘oh spoke with Yosep. “In my dream: there am I, standing by the bank of the Ye’or. 18There, from the Ye’or seven cows going up, sturdy in body and lovely in appearance, and they grazed among the reeds. 19And there, seven more cows going up after them, lean and very bad in appearance, skinny[[229]](#footnote-229) in body. I haven’t seen the like of them in the entire country of Miṣrayim for how bad they were. 20And the skinny, bad cows ate the first seven sturdy cows 21and they came inside them. But it wouldn’t have been acknowledged that they had come inside them; their appearance was as bad as it was at the beginning. I woke up, 22then I saw in my dream, and there – seven ears of wheat going up on one stalk, full and good-quality; 23and there – seven withered ears, thin, scorched by the east wind, springing up after them. 24The thin ears swallowed the seven good ears. I said it to the diviners but no one could tell me.”

25Yosep said to Par’oh, “Par‘oh’s dream is one. What God[[230]](#footnote-230) is going to do, he has told Par‘oh. 26The seven good cows are seven years and the seven good ears are seven years. It’s one dream. 27The seven skinny, bad cows that were going up after them are seven years, as are the seven empty[[231]](#footnote-231) ears, scorched by the east wind. There will be seven years of famine. 28That’s the thing that I am stating[[232]](#footnote-232) to Par‘oh. What God is going to do, he has shown Par‘oh. 29There: seven years are coming, great abundance in the entire country of Miṣrayim, 30but seven years of famine will arise after them, and the entire abundance in the country of Miṣrayim will be forgotten. The famine will consume the country, 31and the abundance in the country won’t be acknowledged in the face of that famine afterwards, because it will be very severe. 32Concerning the repeating of the dream to Par’oh, twice: the thing is fixed by God. God is going to do it quickly.

33So now, Par‘oh should look for an insightful, expert individual, and set him over the country of Miṣrayim. 34Par‘oh should act and appoint appointees over the country and acquire a fifth of[[233]](#footnote-233) the country of Miṣrayim in the seven years of abundance. 35They should collect all the food in these good years that are coming, lay up grain under Par‘oh’s charge in the towns as food, and keep it. 36The food will be something appointed[[234]](#footnote-234) for the country for the seven years of famine that are going to happen in the country of Miṣrayim so the country is not cut off by the famine.”

37The thing was good in the eyes of Par‘oh and in the eyes of all his servants, 38and Par‘oh said to his servants, “Shall we find a man like this, in whom is the spirit of God?” 39So Par‘oh said to Yosep, “Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one insightful and expert like you. 40You yourself will be over my household, and to your bidding all my people will submit.[[235]](#footnote-235) Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you.”

41So Par‘oh said to Yosep, “See, I’m putting[[236]](#footnote-236) you over the entire country of Miṣrayim.” 42Par‘oh removed his signet ring from on his hand and put it on Yosep’s hand, had him clothed in linen robes, and put a gold collar[[237]](#footnote-237) on his neck. 43He had him ride in the chariot of his second-in-command, and people called out before him, “Kneel down!”[[238]](#footnote-238) He put[[239]](#footnote-239) him over the entire country of Miṣrayim. 44Par‘oh said to Yosep, “Whereas I am Par’oh, without you no one will raise his hand or his foot in the entire country of Miṣrayim.” 45Par‘oh named Yosep Ṣapenat Pa‘neah and gave him Asenat daughter of Poṭi Pera, the priest[[240]](#footnote-240) in On, as wife. And Yosep went out[[241]](#footnote-241) over the country of Miṣrayim. 46Yosep was a man of thirty years when he took his stand before Par‘oh, the king of Miṣrayim.

So Yosep went out from before Par‘oh and passed through the whole country of Miṣrayim. 47In the seven years of abundance, the country produced by fistfuls,[[242]](#footnote-242) 48and he collected all the food of the seven years that passed in the country of Miṣrayim and put food in the towns (the food of a town’s open country that was around it he put inside it). 49Yosep laid up grain like the sand of the sea in huge amounts until he stopped accounting, because accounting was impossible.

50To Yosep two sons were born before the famine year came, sons to whom Asenat daughter of Poṭi Pera, the priest in On, gave birth for him. 51Yosep named the firstborn Menaššeh, because “God has made me forget all my trouble and my father’s entire household.” 52The second he named Eprayim, because “God has made me fruitful in the country of my affliction.”

53The seven years of abundance that passed in the country of Miṣrayim came to an end 54and the seven years of famine began to come, as Yosep had said. The famine happened in all the countries, but in the entire country of Miṣrayim there was bread. 55So the entire country of Miṣrayim was hungry and the people cried out to Par‘oh for bread, and Par‘oh said to all Miṣrayim, “Go to Yosep, do what he says to you.” 56When the famine was over the entire face of the country, Yosep opened all that was in them and traded grain supplies[[243]](#footnote-243) to Miṣrayim. So the famine prevailed in the country of Miṣrayim.

## Interpretation

This closing scene brings the story in Gen 37—41 to an interim climax; to put it the other way, Gen 37—40 has provided the background to Gen 41. Gen 41 would have been impossible without Gen 39:20b-40:23; Gen 39:20b-40:23 would have been impossible without Gen 39:1-20a; and Gen 39:1-20a would have been impossible without Gen 37. The wheel has turned full circle: “Joseph’s misfortunes began with dreams and now end through dreams.”[[244]](#footnote-244) Not that all the questions raised by Gen 37—40 are answered here, though the close of the chapter points towards them. Indeed, one could say that vv. 50-52 form a false conclusion to the story begun in Gen 37: Joseph hasn’t really forgotten his family. Further, Gen 42 and the continuing unfolding story would be impossible without Gen 37—41. While the chapter thus relates to what precedes, it also brings us to “the main action” in the story.[[245]](#footnote-245) MT thus marks it as the beginning of a new unit comprising 41:1—44:17, but the English chapter division rightly recognizes that Gen 41 comprises a complete scene (though I associate v. 57 with what follows).[[246]](#footnote-246) It constitutes a turning point in the account of Jacob’s lines of descent, and in particular, a turning point in what happens to Joseph in Egypt. It marks a transition from Act One to Act Two in his story; for convenience I treat it as the closing scene within Act One of the account of Jacob’s lines of descent. It takes up the theme of famine, which is not only a central motif in Part Four of Genesis but also a theme that has featured through Part Two and Part Three.

A pair of dreams again need interpreting, but there is some heightening of the parallelism in relation to the preceding chapter. Pharaoh is now the dreamer, not (disgraced) members of his staff. And after the disappointment of Gen 40, the chapter relates a reversal. We could fear that the sequence that occurred twice in Gen 39—40 would recur again, but it doesn’t. Whereas the previous two units began hopefully but then disappointed, Gen 41 begins perhaps despondently but then encourages.

Vv. 1-8 Pharaoh dreams, but can’t get his dreams interpreted.

Vv. 9-13 The officer over the butlers remembers about Joseph

Vv. 14-16 Pharaoh summons Joseph

Vv. 17-24 Pharaoh recounts the dreams to Joseph

Vv. 25-32 Joseph interprets the dreams

Vv. 33-36 Joseph advises Pharaoh about what to do

Vv. 37-46a Pharaoh appoints Joseph as controller, and marries him to Asenat

Vv. 46b-49 Joseph implements his proposal about collecting surplus grain

Vv. 50-52 Joseph has two sons

Vv. 53-56 The famine comes and Joseph distributes the accumulated surplus

**41:1-8.** “Two full years” passed for Joseph; Yahweh “took all human grounds of hope away from him.”[[247]](#footnote-247) But then (TgPsJ nicely adds), God was mindful of Joseph.

Genesis narrates Pharaoh’s dreams (vv. 1b-4a)—“or better yet, nightmares”[[248]](#footnote-248)—in the regular way. The pointer “there” introduces different stages in the dreams, drawing the listener into the dreams. The cows would be among the reeds and in the water in order to cool off. Cows do so in temperate countries, but might be expected especially to do so in a country as hot as Egypt. Whereas in Gen 37 we learn the content of the dreams only in the course of their being reported and then their interpretation is related only by the family and is not confirmed, and in Gen 40 we again learn the contents of the dreams only in the course of their being reported but it is repeated in the course of their interpretation by Joseph, in Gen 41 the narrator relates the content of the dreams as Pharaoh has them, then we hear it again as Pharaoh reports them to Joseph, then we hear it again as Joseph interprets them. Their importance is thus underlined and suspense keeps rising.

The motif of the dreamer waking up then going back to sleep (vv. 4b-7a) and having another dream is partly paralleled in Dan 2 where the king then cannot remember his dream, as well as in the Gilgamesh story and elsewhere in Middle Eastern writings.[[249]](#footnote-249) While the symbolism of the dreams in Gen 40 was odd (as is the way with dreams), the symbolism in Pharaoh’s dreams is more bizarre. They combine the everyday (the Nile, the khamsin—strictly, in Egypt it would be a south wind)[[250]](#footnote-250) and the fantastic. Whereas the dream had given no explanation of the cows’ thinness, it explains the thinness of the ears of grain, which perhaps retrospectively raises the question whether the Nile was somehow responsible for the fate of the second set of cows.

Pharaoh realizes it was a dream (vv. 7b-8), which means it is important and needs taking note of. But what does it signify? It doesn’t look positive in its implications. Like Nebuchadnezzar in Dan 2:1, Pharaoh becomes agitated and has his experts in dream interpretation summoned. Unlike Nebuchadnezzar, he relates the dream to the diviners, rather than also expecting them to know what the dream was. Whereas the dreams of Joseph’s fellow-prisoners in Gen 40 were of vital personal importance, like Nebuchadnezzar Pharaoh has dreams that relate to national affairs. “Does not everybody dream? But when a king dreams, it serves the whole world” (*GenR* 89:4). Dream divination is thus a key expertise in Egypt as it is in Babylon.[[251]](#footnote-251)

Like Nebuchadnezzar, however, Pharaoh finds his resources not up to the task. *GenR* 89:6 reports the nice hypothesis that they plausibly interpret the dream as revealing that the king will have seven daughters but will also bury them. “They all sweat in vain.”[[252]](#footnote-252) Yet the symbolism of the dreams ought to have made them fairly easy to interpret.[[253]](#footnote-253) Perhaps God arranged for the interpreters to be unable to do so (so TgPsJ); it can be the fate of this world’s wisdom to fail even when the question might not look so difficult, because God can cut off the speech of the people one trusts and take away the wisdom of elders (Job12:10),[[254]](#footnote-254) make nonsense of the insight of the experts (Isa 44:25).[[255]](#footnote-255) Or was it evident to the interpreters that the dreams conveyed bad news, and were they afraid to say so? The narrator literally says, “there was no one interpreting them for Pharaoh”; it leaves open whether they couldn’t or wouldn’t. Either way, it now turns out that “the problem of Pharaoh is more acute than the problem of Joseph.”[[256]](#footnote-256)

**41:9-13.** At this point Gen 41 differs from Dan 2 as it makes a link with the previous chapter (in the manner of the link between Dan 4 and 5). The butler makes the connection explicit in his reference to being mindful—which is what Joseph had asked for. Again TgPsJ makes a neat observation as it has the head butler attributing Pharaoh’s anger to God; it will be God’s means of exalting Joseph and providing for Jacob and his family. Joseph can be called a boy, as he was in 37:2 when he was seventeen, but the intervening chapters have implied that he has grown up somewhat: see v. 46. So “boy” may more explicitly have the pejorative implications that can attach to the word in American English, especially when applied to servants--just as in 37:2.[[257]](#footnote-257)

**41:14-16.** Joseph is summoned like the experts and rushed to the king like Daniel in Dan 2:25-27. Unlike Daniel he needs to be cleaned up because he is coming from the prison and/or because Egyptian men were clean-shaven—the need is underscored as the prison is again called a cistern. As the head butler has implied, Pharaoh understands that Joseph only has to hear a report of a dream, then he can interpret it—he is not like the experts with their dream books (which anyway had apparently turned out to be useless).

Like Daniel, and like himself in 40:8 (v. 16), Joseph puts the king right over how someone can interpret a dream. It is not because he has the ability or because he has expertise superior to that of Pharaoh’s staff but because God is prepared to reveal something about the future to the king. Like Daniel, he speaks with outrageous confidence about how God will reveal it. Unlike Daniel, Joseph has something to convey that promises well-being not just trouble, though presumably he doesn’t yet know what the dreams were and in this sense he has no basis for thinking he can put a positive spin on them in a way that the Egyptian interpreters perhaps could not. But the events they refer to will indeed be more wide-ranging than would be needed simply to look after Jacob’s family; Pharaoh’s dreams imply that God cares about Egypt itself and the other peoples who will benefit from Egypt’s being able to supply them during the famine.

**41:17-24.** Genesis sometimes moves quickly, sometimes slowly. Here it recounts how Pharaoh relates the dreams we already know about, as Abraham’s servant recounts the story we already know in 24:34-49. In both contexts the repetition underscores the importance of what is repeated. “In the Holy Scriptures a tautology is not an idle matter.”[[258]](#footnote-258) Further, in both contexts the effect is to heighten suspense. Here, we wait to discover what interpretation Joseph will offer. Further, here Pharaoh elaborates on what Genesis reported earlier, as Daniel’s interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s vision adds to the vision itself. The cows were the most emaciated that Pharaoh had ever seen, and eating the sturdy cows made them look no better.

**41:25-32.** Whereas Gen 37 and 40 had not explicitly taken their dreams to refer to something God would do, Joseph speaks in terms of God’s acting and not only in terms of God’s interpretation.

Joseph does not explain every element in the dream (vv. 26-31), as is the case with the dreams in Daniel; he does not comment on the scrawny cows being just as scrawny after eating as they were before. He puts the emphasis on God’s involvement: on what God is going to do, on God’s speaking to Pharaoh, on God’s showing, on what God has fixed. He puts more emphasis on the bad news than on the good news, as Pharaoh had. It might therefore seem odd that in v. 16 Joseph had spoken of Pharaoh’s well-being. But there are indeed seven years of abundance to come, even if they are to be followed by seven years of famine. While there is not a self-evident meaning to the symbolism of seven, of cows coming up from the Nile, and of ears of grain, Joseph’s interpretation makes one say, “Ah, yes.”[[259]](#footnote-259) The Nile is the source of Egypt’s flourishing and grain is key to it; more broadly, the country of Egypt is “the gift of the Nile.”[[260]](#footnote-260) The down side is that when the rains fail to the south, in Sudan, the level of the Nile falls, the land loses its irrigation, grain does not grow, and famine follows. There are other references to a seven-year food shortage in Egypt because the Nile failed to flood.[[261]](#footnote-261) The seven years—seven years motif thus schematizes a familiar pattern. And seven holy cows feature briefly in the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*.[[262]](#footnote-262)

The thing is indeed fixed by God (v. 32). God will take action to effect his decision, and will do so quickly. The dreams had once again come in twos (cf. 37:5-11; 40:4-15), but here the implication is different: the doubling evidences the fact that God has decided on something and that it will happen. Joseph offers no insight on why God will act as he will; both flourishing and famine seem to be just one of those things. But it will be the means of reuniting Jacob’s family.

**41:33-36**. A second reason why the word “well-being” was not inappropriate is that God’s revelation offers the prospect of life continuing through the seven years of famine. But this prospect requires human action. The sovereign power of God and the reality of God’s revelation about the future do not issue in human quietude. Now not only was Egypt used to the periodic failure of the Nile and to the consequent food shortages; Egyptian texts refer to occasions when local administrators took responsibility for supplying resources during famine years, or claimed to have done so.[[263]](#footnote-263) Egyptian texts also refer to the Pharaoh’s acceptance of responsibility for seeing that people did not starve during a famine.[[264]](#footnote-264) But to safeguard against the famine’s issuing in the death of the country, Joseph suggests that the coming situation requires a new, double layer of comprehensive administration—a supplies master and a country-wide body of administrators. The responsibility of royal advisers is first to make predictions about likely events and then to propose action that should be taken in light of their predictions, and Joseph thus moves from the first to the second.[[265]](#footnote-265) In this connection, too, Joseph shows himself more expert than Pharaoh’s regular advisers.[[266]](#footnote-266)

**41:37-45a.** So Joseph leaps from being royal prisoner to being the second most important person in the kingdom.Pharaoh’s talk of God’s spirit being key to Joseph’s gift of interpretation recurs in Nebuchadnezzar’s acknowledgment in Dan 4:8, 9, 18 [5, 6, 15]; 5:11, 14 though it contrasts with Joseph’s own prescription of an insightful, expert individual. While it might not seem logical to infer that the capacity to interpret a dream qualifies a person for the job Joseph has described, being indwelt by God’s spirit might be a qualification (cf. Isa 11:2), and if Pharaoh is correct in his observation, it hints at the implication that God’s spirit cares about the Egyptians, while if God has given Joseph not only the interpretation of the dreams but the suggestion about the action that needs taking, then God can enable Joseph to do the job he has described.

Pharaoh’s “household” in the present context (vv. 40-41) will be the “country” itself to which Pharaoh goes on to refer, the “family” of which he is head; as his senior minister, Joseph will be its “father” in his stead (cf. the description of Eliakim in Isa 22:21). Genesis does not give Joseph a formal title such as something equivalent to prime minister. His responsibility relates to the particular focus of the issue raised by Pharaoh’s dream.[[267]](#footnote-267) He apparently holds “the well-known Egyptian office of ‘Overseer of the Granaries of Upper and Lower Egypt’”; Egypt was quite used to elevating people of foreign origin to important positions.[[268]](#footnote-268) Did Joseph envisage himself as the supplies master? It would fit with the estimate of himself that was implied by his own dreams. But even if we do not assume that his dreams have implications regarding his self-estimate nor that he just now envisaged Pharaoh’s deciding to appoint him to the post he had prescribed, Pharaoh’s decision does actually open up the way for the fulfillment of those dreams.

Pharaoh immediately seals Joseph’s appointment ceremonially and substantially (vv. 42-44), speaking as someone with the authority to do so (“I am Pharaoh”).[[269]](#footnote-269) His signet ring would be his seal (see e.g., Est 3:10, 12).[[270]](#footnote-270)

As a senior Egyptian official, Joseph will need an Egyptian name (v. 45). Pharaoh’s naming of Joseph would be a further sign of his exercising authority over him, as is the case with another Pharaoh in 2 Kings 23:34.[[271]](#footnote-271) So is his arranging Joseph’s marriage; the particular match that Pharaoh prescribes would be another mark of giving him proper status in the country. The apparently relaxed attitude of Joseph and of Genesis to this marriage compares with its attitude to Melchizedeq, with Genesis’s general attitude of “ecumenical bonhomie,”[[272]](#footnote-272) and with Moses’s later marriage to a Sudanese woman (Num 12:1; the Hellenistic story of *Joseph and Asenath* has Asenat converting to Judaism). Marrying an Egyptian is apparently not subject to the critique that applies to marrying a Canaanite. Joseph’s new name and his wife’s name are plausible Egyptian ones, when one allows for changes that would come about when they are transliterated into Hebrew. Genesis does not comment on their meaning as it does with other names (including those of Joseph’s sons in vv. 51-52), and early translations and modern commentators differ on their possible meanings. On, on the northeast side of Cairo, was a center of the worship of the sun god and was thus also known as Sun City (Jer 43:13; hence its Greek name Heliopolis). Its (high) priest would therefore be a significant person. His name is a variant on the name of Joseph’s original master.[[273]](#footnote-273) “By these new connections Joseph has become completely Egyptian.”[[274]](#footnote-274)

**41:45b-49.** Beginning his work involves going around the entire country to discover the dimensions of the task and to set about appointing the staff who will be involved in implementing his proposal. It’s not explicit whether Pharaoh will buy the annual surpluses from people for the first seven years or whether he is imposing a twenty per cent tax rate, though it does seem that a twenty per cent tax rate became permanent feature of Egyptian life (47:24-26). Grain was a regular medium for the payment of taxes and the towns would be set up for its storage.[[275]](#footnote-275) Ironically, the descendants of Joseph and his brothers will find themselves laboring on the building of store cities for what the government levies (Exod 1:11). Thus “Joseph’s counsel to Pharaoh is troublesome for all who have ever lived under the shadow of empire.”[[276]](#footnote-276) On the other hand, the alternative might be self-indulgence or waste followed by starvation, and action such as Joseph recommends could ensure that life would continue and guard against profiteering.[[277]](#footnote-277)

**41:50-52.** Ifwe wondered whether his marriage indicated that he was out of touch with his God (or whether grain like the sand of the sea indicated that he had forgotten the promise about offspring as numerous as the sand of the sea), the names he gives to his sons indicate that it is not so. God has a twofold gift for Joseph: the possibility of forgetting and the possibility of being fruitful.[[278]](#footnote-278) At one level and in a good sense Joseph has forgotten the family that sold him into servitude in Egypt many years before, in his teenage years. An audience that puts out of mind its knowledge of how the story will unfold could imagine that there will be no more talk of Joseph’s relationship with his birth family—or at least that Joseph thinks this way. Yet the names he gives his sons suggest that he has forgotten yet not forgotten.[[279]](#footnote-279) The name *mᵉnaššeh* suggests a link with the verb *našāh* and the meaning “he [God or the child] makes [me/us] forget,” in a good sense—forget suffering and affliction. But Genesis adds reference to forgetting the family. The name *’eprayim* could remind one of the verb *pārāh* “be fruitful”; but the explanation again indicates that Joseph has not actually forgotten the tough experiences he has been through.

**41:53-56.** Pharaoh’s dream comes true and Joseph’s plan works. “Famine… famine… famine… famine… famine,” Genesis keep repeating. The closing verses incidentally refer to other countries also being affected by famine, which key observation leads into the next chapter.

# Genesis 41:57—42:38— How the Ten Brothers Come to Egypt

## Overview

In light of the famine in Canaan, Joseph’s brothers (less Benjamin) go to Egypt to buy grain; they do not recognize Joseph but he recognizes them. He accuses them of being spies and sends them (holding onto Simeon) to get Benjamin, to prove their integrity, and he has their silver put back in their bags when they leave. Jacob refuses to let Benjamin go in order to make it possible for Simeon to return.

## Translation

57Now the entire world came to Miṣrayim to trade grain supplies with Yosep, because the famine prevailed in the entire world.[[280]](#footnote-280) 42:1So Ya‘aqob looked:[[281]](#footnote-281) there were supplies in Miṣrayim. Ya‘aqob said to his sons, “Why do you look at each other?”[[282]](#footnote-282) 2and said, “There: I’ve heard that there are supplies in Miṣrayim. Go down there and get supplies for us from there so we can live and not die.” 3So ten of Yosep’s brothers went down to get supplies of grain from Miṣrayim; 4Binyamin, Yosep’s brother Ya‘aqob did not send with his brothers, because (he said), “so that harm doesn’t befall him.” 5So Yiśra’el’s sons came to get supplies among the people who were coming because there was the famine in the country of Kena‘an.

6Now Yosep being the person with power over the country was the one who was trading supplies to the entire people of the country.[[283]](#footnote-283) So Yosep’s brothers came and bowed down to him, their faces to the ground. 7Yosep saw his brothers and recognized them, but he acted without recognition to them[[284]](#footnote-284) and spoke toughly with them. He said to them, “Where have you come from?” They said, “From the country of Kena‘an, to get food supplies.”

8So Yosep recognized his brothers but they didn’t recognize him, 9and Yosep was mindful of the dreams that he had about them. He said to them, “You’re investigating things.[[285]](#footnote-285) It’s to see the country’s bareness[[286]](#footnote-286) that you’ve come.” 10They said to him, “No, my lord, in that your servants have come to get grain supplies. 11We’re all of us sons of one man. We’re upright[[287]](#footnote-287) men. Your servants have not been investigating things.” 12He said to them, “No, you’ve come to see the country’s bareness.” 13They said to him, “Your servants were twelve, we were brothers, the sons of one man in the country of Kena‘an. But there: the littlest is with our father at the moment, and one[[288]](#footnote-288) is no more.”[[289]](#footnote-289) 14But Yosep said to them, “It’s as I stated to you: you’re investigating things. 15By this you’ll be tested. Par‘oh’s life,[[290]](#footnote-290) you won’t leave here unless the littlest of your brothers comes here. 16Send off one of you so he can get your brother, and you yourselves be confined, so your words may be tested, whether there is truth with you. Otherwise, Par‘oh’s life, you’re investigating things.” 17And he confined them under guard for three days.

18But Yosep said to them on the third day, “Do this and live; I revere God. 19If you’re upright, one of your brothers must be confined in your guard house, and you—go, and bring grain supplies for the famine in your households, 20and the littlest of your brothers you are to bring to me so your words may be shown to be true and you may not die.” They did so, 21but they said to each other, “Really, we’re paying the penalty for our brother. We saw the distress of his spirit[[291]](#footnote-291) when he pleaded for favor with us and we didn’t listen. That’s why this distress has come upon us.” 22And Re’uben averred[[292]](#footnote-292) to them, “I said to you, ‘Don’t do wrong against the child,’ didn’t I, and you didn’t listen. Yes, his blood – there, it’s being required.”

23Now they didn’t know that Yosep was listening, because there was an interpreter between them. 24He turned away from them and cried, but came back to them and spoke to them, and got Šim‘on from among them and confined him before their eyes. 25But Yosep gave orders and people filled their bags with grain—and to put back their silver, each man, into his sack, and give them provisions for the journey.

So he did this for them, 26they loaded their grain supplies onto their donkeys, and they went from there. 27One of them opened his sack to give feed to his donkey at the lodging, and he saw his silver. There it was, in the mouth of his bag. 28He said to his brothers, “My silver has been put back! Yes, here it is, in my bag!” Their understanding failed[[293]](#footnote-293) and they turned trembling to one another, saying “What is this that God has done to us?”

29They came to Ya‘aqob their father in the country of Kena‘an and told him all that had happened to them: 30“The man who is lord of the country spoke toughly with us and treated us as people who were investigating the country. 31We said to him, ‘We’re upright. We haven’t been investigating things. 32We were twelve, brothers, the sons of our father; one is no more and the littlest is with our father in the country of Kena‘an at the moment.’ 33But the man who is lord of the country said to us, ‘By this I shall know that you’re upright. Your brothers: leave one with me, and in respect of the famine in your households: get something and go, 34and bring the littlest of your brothers to me, so I may know that you’re not investigating things but are upright. I’ll give your brother to you and you can move about in the country.’” 35Then as they were emptying their sacks, there – each man’s silver pouch was in his sack. They and their father saw the silver pouches, and they were afraid.

36Ya‘aqob their father said to them, “Me: you have bereaved me of children. Yosep is no more and Šim‘on is no more and Binyamin you will get. On me it has all fallen.” 37But Re’uben said to his father, “You may put my two sons to death if I don’t bring him back to you. Put him into my charge and I myself will bring him back to you.” 38But he said, “My son is not to go down with you, because his brother is dead and he alone is left. Should harm come to him on the journey that you would go on, you will send my gray hair down with grief to Še’ol.”

## Interpretation

Act One in the story of Jacob’s lines of descent took Joseph from dissension within the family to having a key role in Egypt. But the story is not interested in events in Egypt, or even in Joseph’s success, for their own sake. Its real interest always lay in Jacob’s family, and how they ended up in Egypt, on which it now focuses. Act Two in the story (41:57—47:26) focuses on a series of movements between Canaan and Egypt on the part of the brothers and eventually of Jacob, initially to get food during the famine. There are two visits by the brothers as there were two dreams in Gen 37, two imprisonments in Gen 39—40, two dreams in Gen 40, and two more dreams in Gen 41. On each visit Joseph avoids revealing to his brothers who he is, until he can hold back no longer. As the story unfolds, “the writers tax their inventiveness to the utmost in retarding the *dénouement* of the plot,” with these repeated journeys to Egypt, interviews with Joseph, and expedients by Joseph “to excite the compunction of his brethren,”[[294]](#footnote-294) who “go from one fear and distress to another.”[[295]](#footnote-295)

In one sense, then, nothing happens in Gen 42—44, as nothing happened in Gen 39—41. In another sense something vital happens as the brothers are driven to articulate some truths and to relate to themselves, to one another, and to Jacob in a more wholesome human way than they did in Gen 37. During the second visit, Judah in particular is a different person from the man he was at the beginning of Gen 38 and even at the end of Gen 38. And as Joseph moves from harshness to the tears that indicate that he has not forgotten his trouble and his family as he claimed in 41:57, he implicitly confirms their recognition that in the events related in Gen 37 he knew a distress of spirit that was there unexpressed.

Scene 1 within Act Two covers the first visit. It comprises four main sub-scenes, the first pair and the last pair being linked by a briefer account of a journey, the whole being arranged abcc’b’a’:

41:57—42:4 Jacob and the brothers: a conflict and a commission

42:5 The brothers arrive in Egypt

42:6-17 Joseph and the brothers: an accusation and an arrest

42:18-25 Joseph and the brothers: a condition and a ploy

42:26-28 The brothers’ leave Egypt

42:29-39 Jacob and the brothers: a report and an offer

As commonly happens with parallelism and palistrophes, the second half represents an enhanced version of the first half. So the brothers and Joseph are more self-revealing in vv. 18-25, , the journey is more complicated in vv. 26-28, and Jacob’s emotions and focus on Benjamin and the conversation between Jacob and his sons are more deeply felt in vv. 29-39.

Whereas Egypt and Joseph have been the focus in Gen 39—41, this chapter starts and ends in Canaan with Jacob.[[296]](#footnote-296) In this sense the audience looks at events through Jacob’s eyes, though it is aware that Jacob and the brothers only half-know what is going on. They don’t know what Joseph knows and they don’t know how Joseph is manipulating them. Indeed, through Scene 3 until Joseph reveals himself, Joseph knows what he is doing but the brothers and their father have no clue. But Joseph, too, doesn’t know how upright they really are or whether they are telling the truth about Benjamin, and his own experience of them must make it an open question. The audience also only three-quarters knows what is going on. It doesn’t know for sure how to evaluate the brothers’ admission of guilt and their conversations with one another and their question about God in v. 28. Both Joseph and the audience know that the brothers are only half-telling the truth in v. 11 (“we are upright men”) and v. 13 (“one is no more”). And the audience has to try to work out why Joseph is behaving the way he is. Is he simply testing the brothers, as he says? Or getting his own back? Or trying to teach them a lesson, and if so, what lesson? Or seeking to bring about a more complete fulfillment of his dream than that implied by v. 6? Or seeking to draw them to proper repentance? Or what? Why does he insist on Benjamin coming? Why doesn’t he respond to their admission of guilt? Does he really revere God, as he says in v. 18? And what is the significance of his crying? The audience has to listen carefully until many of these questions, at least, are clarified by the end of the chapter.

**41:57—42:4**. The new scene goes straight on from what precedes but it also picks up from Gen 37: thus “the two main lines of the Joseph story come together.”[[297]](#footnote-297)

That the famine would extend beyond Egypt (41:57) was suggested neither by Pharaoh’s dream nor by Joseph’s interpretation, but it did so, as 41:54 has incidentally noted. Actually, the widespread famine would really mean different famines. While Egypt’s problem would be the Nile’s failure to irrigate the fields on either side because of a fall in its level caused by a failure of the rains to the south, the problem in Canaan would be caused by a failure of the rains on the land itself which would have a different explanation and would be more frequent. So it will be a nasty coincidence when famine strikes in both regions in the same year.

Jacob is looking at what is happening in Egypt (42:1-3) and perhaps looking at groups of people from Canaan returning with supplies from there, whereas the brothers are just looking at each other. They are frozen in inactivity. Jacob, who hasn’t been very active in this story for quite a while, comes back to life. The narrative’s following up his question with the further “he said,” which introduces his statement, implies that the brothers have had nothing to say in response to the question, and his “almost excessive spelling out” of things (“so we may live and not die”) further reflects his impatience with his sons, “who are acting as though they did not grasp the gravity of the situation.”[[298]](#footnote-298)

His concern about harm coming to Benjamin (42:4) through the trek to a foreign land may derive partly from harm having come to Joseph on his trek (Jacob thinks). It may also derive from Benjamin’s being still relatively young; he was born when his brothers were almost grown up. He really was the son of Jacob’s old age (see 37:2-3),[[299]](#footnote-299) and if Joseph was once his favorite son, Benjamin has taken his place. Further, Benjamin alone was the full brother of the lost Joseph, the two of them being the only two sons of Rachel. Since Benjamin was only a tiny clan (even before the events in Judg 19—21), though it did produce Israel’s first king, Benjaminites might hear of his status with some ruefulness (though in 46:21 Benjamin has ten sons).

**42:5.** Without Benjamin, then, the brothers arrive in Egypt, as just one company of foreigners among many such companies coming to buy grain. Referring to them as “Israel’s sons” means using the regular expression for “Israelites” and could suggest to the audience that their journey down to and back up from Egypt anticipates how “the Israelites” will eventually go down to Egypt and come back up from there.

**42:6-17.** Thus these ten brothers are by no means the only people appearing before Joseph and doing obeisance; other people like them are doing so every week.

But Joseph recognizes them (v. 7), notwithstanding his recent declaration in 41.51 that God had enabled him to forget them. It’s not surprising that they don’t recognize him, given that he is now an adult and looks like an Egyptian. “Disparity of knowledge” is now key to the unfolding of the Joseph story.[[300]](#footnote-300) Initially it’s more surprising that Joseph acts like a stranger or foreigner, that he acts tough, towards them. Does he treat all foreigner grain-seekers this way? Is he simply acting in a way consistent with the earlier portrait of the “spoiled favorite”?[[301]](#footnote-301) Might we be asking the wrong question of the narrative if we focus on his possible motivation for acting in the tough way he does?[[302]](#footnote-302) Is the deceit that he practices excusable as it aims at the restoration of *shalom*? Part of the point, at least, is what is going to be achieved by his tough stance.[[303]](#footnote-303) He needs to get through to the brothers: see vv. 21-22, 28. But at this point in the story the answers to these questions are not clear. The audience has to wait for them to be clarified.

His remembering his dreams (vv. 8-9a) begins to provide explanation for his behavior. This memory relates to their now bowing down to him; the verb recurs from 37:7, 9, and 10. They have bowed “to the ground”; ironically, it was they who had added this phrase in 37:10. Whereas they had tried to put Joseph down to stop his dream becoming reality, by selling him to Egypt they have enabled it to become so. [[304]](#footnote-304) With further irony, it was sheaves that stood for Joseph and his brothers in his first dream, and now grain is the reason for their bowing down. In the terms of the second dream, ten “stars” have bowed down to him, though only ten,[[305]](#footnote-305) and not the sun and moon. Yet even without the dream, Jacob’s favoritism and the brothers’ resentment would have taken Joseph into Egypt. Realizing that their arrival and their necessary bowing down to the supplies master fulfills the dream means realizing that the events that have taken place were not mere chance. The narrative does not explicitly bring God in at this point, but Joseph’s words in 50:20 will spell out the implications that are left unstated here.

Joseph goes on to express or invent a suspicion (vv. 9b-10) which might be both plausible and ludicrous. Egypt would need to be wary of espionage on the part of foreign agents, working for some big power such as the Hittites or Hyksos[[306]](#footnote-306) or for Canaanite coalitions interested in throwing off Egyptian authority. So why are there so many men in this group? Yet are these raggedy shepherd-types people who are investigating the country with hostile intent, looking into the bareness or emptiness or nakedness (the most common meaning of *‘erwāh*) of the one country in the region that is neither bare nor empty nor naked? Is Egypt really vulnerable to them? And what is the connection between Joseph’s remembering his dreams and his accusing the brothers of espionage: is it resentment, or mistrust, or what?[[307]](#footnote-307) Is it that he needs to get the rest of the family there? Or is it that the story is about Joseph’s journey from trauma to resolution,[[308]](#footnote-308) and the memory is traumatic? Again we have to wait for such questions to be clarified.

But no, they are a family group, not an espionage team, (v. 11), “sons of one man, upright men, not spies,” they add asyndetically and anxiously. The first statement is unexceptionable, but significant—spies wouldn’t be family. The audience knows that the second is questionable in light of what the story has narrated about them, and Joseph knows it too. The third is true but is the one Joseph pretends not to swallow. One of the brothers is no more, they have to acknowledge, again with irony; Joseph doesn’t press them about this laconic admission.

Instead (vv. 12-15), he persists with the accusation that they have denied, no matter what they say, like an actual anti-espionage interrogator. Three times he repeats the declaration, but his reason is different from that of a CIA or FBI cross-examiner. His talk of testing involves a double entendre.[[309]](#footnote-309) He is not really thinking they are spies. He is entitled to wonder what kind of men they now are, whether they are the same men they once were. One reason for the repeated questioning might be the suspicion that they could have treated Benjamin the same way as they treated him.[[310]](#footnote-310) Their reference to Benjamin may also give him his chance to exercise an initiative that works towards the more complete fulfillment of the dreams. He underscores his avowal by the expression “Pharaoh’s life” which implies “as sure as the fact that Pharaoh is alive and well, what follows will happen.”

In putting them under confinement in the first instance (vv. 16-17), he subjects them to the same experience as he had: cf. 40:3, 4, and 7. As an alternative to testing them, he could have simply thrown them in prison permanently to rot and thereby got his own back, or just sent them off without the grain they sought. Alternatively he could have told them who he was and thrown his arms around them in the way he eventually will. One can imagine that after they had recovered from the shock they would say how wrongly they had behaved towards him in selling him into servitude in Egypt. But would their expression of sorrow be genuine?

**42:18-25.** He keeps the brothers under arrest for rather less time than he experienced it, then indicates he will be more merciful than he indicated earlier. Whereas before he backed up his statement by saying that it was as sure as the fact that Pharaoh was alive, now he backs it up with his declaration that he is someone who lives in awe and submission to God, and who therefore keeps his word. Instead of one of them going to get Benjamin while the others stay under guard, one of them must stay under guard while the rest take supplies back to Canaan—and get Benjamin. Holding onto one won’t help to establish whether they are spies but it will help to establish whether they (now) care about each other.[[311]](#footnote-311) The brothers might wonder why revering God did not issue in a more merciful plan first time around. The audience might wonder whether he did change his mind or whether always intended to make the arrangement less tough; vv. 25-28 will support the idea that he always knew what he intended.

The realization they now express (vv. 21-22) suggests part of the answer to the audience’s possible question; the time in custody has functioned as a successful test.[[312]](#footnote-312) Over the years that have passed, have they not thought about their action? “But now they are compelled (so to speak) to enter into their own consciences.”[[313]](#footnote-313) They are starting to change. It’s only a start. Their statement is an impersonal one that suggests an outworking of fate or karma. But it’s a start. Joseph is enabling his brothers to achieve a new relationship with their past.[[314]](#footnote-314) Although Gen 37 says nothing about distress, their treatment of Joseph could hardly have failed to have the affect they describe; as they had caused Joseph distress, they can hardy complain that they are now experiencing distress. Reuben’s “I told you so” with its reference to blood being required (see 9:5)[[315]](#footnote-315) also suggests an impersonal process. It, too, indicates how their rethinking is only a start, but it is a start.

Joseph’s crying (vv. 23-25) suggests that he meant his chastisement to draw them towards repentance rather than its being simply a way of getting his own back. “As Joseph hears his brothers’ expression of remorse, the first strong impulse of reconciliation takes place in his own feelings, though he cannot yet trust them and so must go on with the test.”[[316]](#footnote-316) His specifying Simeon as the hostage perhaps reflects his being the next senior brother after Reuben. Following on the tears of v. 24, the return of the money might be a gesture of generosity rather than a trap, but it might be another form of test or part of a strategy for gradually getting them to the point where they will face what they have done.

**42:26-28.** Perhaps only this one man’s silver was in the mouth of the sack rather than pushed further down.[[317]](#footnote-317) “What has God done to us?” In one sense, the rhetorical question will find its answer in 50:19-20. But elsewhere, “What is this that you have done” is an accusatory question (3:13; 12:18; 26:10; 29:25; cf. also 4:10; 20:9). The brothers are protesting about God doing something bad.[[318]](#footnote-318) They think of it as a trap. It will lead to their being falsely accused.[[319]](#footnote-319) They are asking, “What does God have in mind?... Why is God doing this?” They haven’t got as far as confession and repentance yet.[[320]](#footnote-320) Yet they do ask what God is doing; they don’t wonder whether some human hand is responsible.[[321]](#footnote-321) Thus they refer to God, as they did not in vv. 21-22, but their question looks rhetorical.

**42:29-35**. As usual, the report of events about which we already know contains telling variants on the narrator’s version. They tell Jacob everything, the narrator says, but they don’t. They don’t tell him about being held in custody for three days. “Leave” is a nice word: it’s the word for God putting Adam in the garden in 2:13. It doesn’t suggest imprisonment. As a whole, the brothers’ report is rather blander than the reality had been.[[322]](#footnote-322) The repetition of the story also incorporates a promise of permission to move about in the country—the offer that Hamor had made in 34:10 and 21. They don’t tell Jacob about the money in the sack, either, but then money pours out everywhere:[[323]](#footnote-323) everyone finds their money in their sacks, not just the one person mentioned in vv. 27-28.

**42:36-38**. “Their father Jacob” repeats the unnecessary description from the previous verse and leads poignantly and accusingly into the indictment that follows.[[324]](#footnote-324) Jacob’s words are understandable. Reuben once again speaks as the eldest of the brothers. He will have four sons by the time of 46:9; maybe he has only two by now, or maybe he speaks in terms of two to double the loss that Jacob fears. If his “I told you so” was unfortunate, he now redeems himself, though “Jacob does not dignify the suggestion with a reply.”[[325]](#footnote-325) Instead, he almost repeats the words he had uttered about Joseph: again there is irony. He alone is left? He alone is left of the love between Jacob and Rachel. Jacob has learned nothing about favoritism. Whether or not God has enabled Joseph to forget, he has not enabled Jacob to forget. “The promises of God seem powerless and empty. The covenant seems to have come to a dead end.”[[326]](#footnote-326)

# Genesis 43:1—44:13— How the Eleven Brothers Come to Egypt

## Overview

Jacob sees that he has no alternative to letting the brothers return to Egypt to buy more grain, taking Benjamin with them. Joseph gives them a bemusingly generous welcome, but then orders his staff to put more silver into their sacks along with his personal chalice. They set off to get back to Canaan, but Joseph has them chased, the chalice is found in Benjamin’s bag, and they return to the town.

## Translation

1Now the famine in the world[[327]](#footnote-327) was severe. 2So when they had finished eating the supplies that they had brought from Miṣrayim, their father said to them, “Go back, get us a little by way of food supplies.”[[328]](#footnote-328) 3But Yehudah said to him, “The man solemnly affirmed[[329]](#footnote-329) to us, ‘You will not see my face unless your brother is with you.’ 4If you actually are going to send our brother with us, we’ll go down and get supplies for you.[[330]](#footnote-330) 5But if you actually aren't going to send him, we won’t go down, because the man himself said to us, ‘You will not see my face unless your brother is with you.’”

6Yiśra’el[[331]](#footnote-331) said, “Why did you act badly with me by telling the man whether you had another brother?” 7They said, “The man specifically asked about us and about our family, saying ‘Is your father still alive? Do you have a brother?’ and we told him in accordance with these words. Could we possibly know that he would say, ‘Bring your brother down here?’”

8Then Yehudah said to Yiśra’el his father, “Send the boy with me so we can set off and go, and live and not die, both we and also you and also our little ones. 9I myself guarantee him: from my hand you can require him. If I don’t bring him back to you and set him before you, I will be in the wrong in relation to you for all time. 10Because had we not delayed, we could by now have got back here twice.”

11Yiśra’el their father said to them, “If so, then, this is what you must do. Get some of the country’s treats[[332]](#footnote-332) in your bags and carry them down to the man as a gift: a little balm and a little syrup,[[333]](#footnote-333) spices and myrrh, pistachios and almonds. 12And silver, a double amount, get in your hand. And the silver that was put back in the mouth of your bags: carry it back in your hand. Perhaps it was a mistake. 13And your brother: get him and set off, go back to the man.[[334]](#footnote-334) 14May El Šadday himself[[335]](#footnote-335) give you compassion before the man so he will send off your other brother to you, and Binyamin. Me – when I am bereaved, I am bereaved.”[[336]](#footnote-336)

15So the men got this gift, and a double amount of silver they got in their hand, and Binyamin, and they set off and went down to Miṣrayim. They stood before Yosep 16and Yosep saw Binyamin with them, and said to the person over his household, “Bring the men to the house and slaughter an animal and get it ready, because with me the men will eat at noon.” 17So the man did as Yosep said. The man brought the men to Yosep’s house, 18but the men were afraid because they were brought to Yosep’s house. They said, “It’s because of the silver that came back in our bags the first time that we’ve been brought, to overwhelm us[[337]](#footnote-337) and fall upon us and get us as servants, and our donkeys.”

19So they went up to the man who was over Yosep’s household and spoke to him at the entrance of the house. 20They said, “Excuse me, my lord, we did come down the first time to get food supplies. 21But when we came to the lodging, we opened our bags and there: each man’s silver was in the mouth of his bag, our silver by its weight. We’ve brought it back in our hand 22(we’ve brought down other silver in our hand to get food supplies).[[338]](#footnote-338) We don’t know who put our silver in our bags.” 23He said, “Things are well regarding you. Don’t be afraid, in that your God, yes,[[339]](#footnote-339) the God of your father, gave you the treasure in your bags, given that your silver came to me.” And he brought Šim‘on out to them. 24So the man brought the men to Yosep’s house, gave them water and they washed their feet, and he gave them feed for their donkeys. 25They got the gift ready for Yosep’s coming at noon, because they’d heard that they were to eat a meal there.

26Yosep came to the house and they brought him the gift that was in their hand, to the house, and bowed down to him to the ground. 27He asked them about whether things were well: “Is it well with your elderly father of whom you spoke? Is he still alive?” 28They said, “It’s well with your servant our father. He’s still alive,” and they did obeisance and bowed down. 29He lifted his eyes and looked at Binyamin his brother, his mother’s son, and said, “This is the littlest of your brothers, of whom you spoke to me, isn’t it,” and said, “God himself show favor to you, son.”

30But Yosep hurried, because his feelings were strong towards his brother and he needed to cry, and he came to a room and cried there. 31Then he washed his face and went out. So he got control of himself and said, “Set out the meal.” 32They set it out for him by himself and for them by themselves and for the Miṣrites who ate with him by themselves, because the Miṣrites could not eat a meal with the ‘Ibrites because this would be an offense to Miṣrayim.[[340]](#footnote-340) 33But they sat before him, the firstborn according to his position as firstborn and the youngest according to his youth. The men looked in astonishment at one another: 34someone carried servings from before him to them, and Binyamin’s serving was bigger than the servings of all of them, by four or five times.[[341]](#footnote-341) They drank and got tipsy with him.

44:1But he ordered the person over his household, “Fill the men’s bags with food, as much as they can carry, and put each man’s silver in the mouth of his bag. 2And my chalice, the silver chalice, put in the mouth of the bag of the youngest, with his silver for his grain supplies.” He acted in accordance with the word that Yosep said.

3When morning dawned and the men had been sent off, they and their donkeys,4though they had left the town they had not gone far when Yosep said to the person over his household, “Set off, chase after the men and catch up with them, and say to them, ‘Why have you repaid bad for good? 5This is the one that my lord drinks with and actually practices divination with, isn’t it? You’ve acted badly in what you’ve done.’” 6So he caught up with them and spoke these words to them. 7They said to him, “Why does my lord speak words such as these? A desecration[[342]](#footnote-342) for your servants to do such a thing as this. 8There: silver that we found in the mouth of our sacks we brought back to you from the country of Kena‘an. So how would we steal silver or gold from your lord’s house? 9Whoever of your servants it is found with, he will die, and also we will become servants to my lord.” 10He said, “While now it will indeed be in accordance with your words, whoever it is found with,[[343]](#footnote-343) he will become a servant to me, but you will be free of guilt.” 11They hurried, each man, and lowered his bag to the ground, and opened, each man, his bag. 12He searched, beginning with the biggest and ending with the littlest, and the chalice was found in Binyamin’s bag. 13They tore their clothes, and they loaded, each man, his donkey and went back to the town.

## Interpretation

Within Act Two of the Joseph story, Scene 2 (Gen 43—45) begins in a way that parallels Scene 1: some time has passed and 43:1 begins with a circumstantial clause relating to this passage of time and the worldwide prevalence of the famine. Scene 2 then unfolds in a way that develops the parallel. There is another confrontation between Jacob and the brothers, another journey to Egypt, another initial meeting with Joseph, another second meeting, and another departure…. The repetition of the sequence thus corresponds to the way earlier scenes or events come in pairs, and in the way the second iteration of a scene or event may go beyond the first. Here, the initial confrontation between Jacob and his brothers is more substantial. The account of the long journey is again brief. The first meeting with Joseph and then with his aide is of similar length to the one in Gen 42 but diametrically opposed in what happens, though once again there are differences between what the brothers know, what Joseph knows, and what the audience knows; the same is true of the second meeting. Once again, there then follows the setting out for home, but here the correspondence seems to have collapsed as the brothers do not make it home but instead they go back to Egypt. The second half of the sequence then repeats: further meetings with Joseph, another departure, then at last an arrival home, and a report to Jacob.

MT makes 44:17 the end of its unit (which began at 41:1), but neither here nor elsewhere are there markers within Gen 43—45 suggesting the end of one scene and the beginning of another. The medieval chapter divisions in printed Hebrew and English Bibles separate off Gen 43 and then Gen 44; but 44:1 needs to be read in continuity with what precedes as it gives no indication of the speaker, and 45:1 simply continues the narrative flow. “Chapters 43—44 do not have their aim in themselves. They point beyond themselves.”[[344]](#footnote-344) It is Gen 43—45 as a whole that comprises Scene 2, balancing 41:57—42:38, but for convenience I divide it into Scene 2A comprising 43:1—44:13 (where the sequence follows the earlier pattern) and Scene 2B comprising 44:14—45:26 (where the sequence deviates but eventually comes to its conclusion). Thus set alongside the sequence in Scene 1, the Scene 2A unfolds:

41:57—42:4 Jacob and the brothers 43:1-14 Jacob and the brothers:

a conflict and a commission a commission and a conflict

42:5 The brothers arrive in Egypt 43:15 The brothers arrive in Egypt

42:6-17 Joseph and the brothers: 43:16-25 Joseph and the brothers:

an accusation and an arrest a welcome and an explanation

42:18-25 Joseph and the brothers: 43:26—44:2 Joseph and the brothers:

a condition and a ploy a meal and a ploy

42:26-28 The brothers’ leave Egypt 44:3-13 The brothers leave Egypt

42:29-39 Jacob and the brothers: [see 45:25-28]

a report and an offer

**43:1-10.** Gen 43 thus begins in a parallel way to 41:57—42:38, with a report of an exchange between Jacob and the brothers that sets them going on a journey to Egypt. The confrontation between Jacob and his brothers is more substantial than the earlier one because the brothers initially resist Jacob’s bidding and because the narrative relates the actual conversations. The detail slows down the story and raises suspense.

Specifically (v. 1) the chapter begins with a parallel circumstantial clause explaining the background to what follows in terms of the severity of the worldwide famine. The implication of the previous chapter is that the brothers had come back with quite a lot of grain (at least ten donkey-loads), but the reference to continuing famine perhaps implies the assumption that in Canaan the rains failed again the following winter, so that the next year’s harvest failed. Thus maybe a year has passed.

Jacob perhaps remembers (v. 2) that the Egyptian supplies master had said that the brothers must bring Benjamin if they want more grain, and it is for reason that he does not set his hopes too high—maybe the supplies master will sell them just a little grain. He makes no reference to the fate of Simeon, which Josephus (*Ant* II, 6:5) has Judah referring to. If the famine had not continued, would Jacob have accepted the loss of Simeon?[[345]](#footnote-345) But v. 14 will make explicit the need to gain release for him.

Judah insists that Jacob face the facts (vv. 3-5). The brothers had not argued with Jacob the first time around but Judah does so now. Jacob has to make his choice: do nothing and starve or risk Benjamin and maybe live. Judah knows which choice he would make. Judah’s prominence here continues the pattern from Gen 37; 38; and 42 and for the audience continues to anticipate the importance of Judah alongside Joseph in the relationships of the Israelite clans. In (twice) speaking of not being able to see the face of the supplies master, he sharpens his account of what happened the previous time (see 42:14-20), in another example of the way the reprise of an account may vary from the first account, and thus fill things out for the audience and maintain interest. Judah’s referring to Joseph simply as “the man” (cf. vv. 5, 6, 7, 11, 13, 14) draws attention to their ignorance of who he actually is.[[346]](#footnote-346)

“Jacob was under pressure from all sides”[[347]](#footnote-347) (vv. 6-7). One can sympathize with his frustration. In speaking of Joseph’s questioning, the brothers’ account continues to tell us more than Gen 42 did; when Judah addresses Joseph in 44:19, he puts it yet another way. But the audience knows that one might also sympathize with the brothers. The supplies master would hardly have been asking his questions if he hadn’t actually known the answers.

Neither can one complain at Judah’s frustration (v. 8). He knows there is only one realistic thing to do. Otherwise all three generations of the family will die. He thus takes up Jacob’s comment about living and not dying (42:2) and “throws it back in his face.”[[348]](#footnote-348) Benjamin is still “the boy” (as 44:22, 30-34), he will still be “the littlest” in v. 29 (as in 42:13, 15, 20; 44:23, 26), and Joseph can call him “son” (v. 29). Joseph is at least in his mid- to late-twenties and Benjamin must be twenty or so. But he is still the kid brother and the son of Jacob’s old age (44:20).

Judah is not just exasperated (vv. 9-10). He is prepared to accept responsibility for his little half-brother who means so much to his father. He knows that if things go wrong, he will “bear the blame forever.”[[349]](#footnote-349) Jacob will be able to treat Judah as responsible for Benjamin’s death and therefore as himself liable to death. “No sacrifice could ever remove the particular ‘sin’ of failing to restore Benjamin to his father.”[[350]](#footnote-350) He speaks ironically in light of the treatment of Joseph in which he had been implicated. And he speaks rhetorically; he knows that it would not help Jacob to have him put to death for causing Benjamin’s death. But he speaks seriously, and speaks as someone on the move morally and personally.

**43:11-14**. Jacob eventually accepts Judah’s argument. There is no alternative but to take the risk, though he is no more helped by Judah’s words in v. 9 than he was by Reuben’s offer in 42:37. But he formulates a plan to encourage a friendly stance on the part of the supplies master, and he prays.

In fostering relationships, one brings gifts (vv. 11-13), and this assumption applies especially to less powerful parties seeking to encourage relationships with more powerful parties; Jacob has already operated on this assumption with Esau (see Gen 32—33; also 1 Sam 10:27; 1 Kings 4:21 [5:1]; 10:1-10).[[351]](#footnote-351) The gifts need not be of great intrinsic value, though Jacob’s list does overlap with the cargo of the camels in 37:25; the symbolism counts. The brothers are to take some choice produce from Canaan, things that were apparently unaffected by the drought. “Long before Aleppo became a bombed-out ruin, it was famous for pistachios. And Ghouta, now a place of horror and chlorine gas, meant orchards of peaches, apricots, pears and almonds that supplied Damascus with sweetness.”[[352]](#footnote-352) The brothers are further to “get” two other things to take with them. There is the silver that had been returned, along with another equivalent amount to buy more grain (cf. vv. 21-22). And there is Benjamin himself.

Accompanying the human action is a prayer (v. 14), with the recurrent implication that the two need to accompany each other; neither alone will do. El Shadday will then look after things: it was El Shadday for whose blessing on Jacob Isaac prayed when he would need protection, and El Shadday who appeared to Jacob himself with a promise of fruitfulness when he returned to Canaan (28:3; 35:11). One prays with the knowledge that God can do as one pleads, though one cannot know whether God will do so. If the journey results in his losing Benjamin, Jacob will have to accept it. Ironically, Jacob echoes his mother’s fear or resignation about him (27:45)—which accompanied the action she successfully took. “When I [will] have perished, I [will] have perished,” Esther declares, in a similar formulation (Esth 4:16).[[353]](#footnote-353) It signifies not resignation but acceptance. Jacob is a little like his grandfather taking off Jacob’s father to kill him. He sends off all his sons. But perhaps “in the solitude of his tent, the promise to Abraham seems to have reached a bitter, empty end.[[354]](#footnote-354)”

**43:15.** So Jacob sends off the gift and the silver—and the boy, attached at the end of the verse without a verb, almost as if unwillingly on Jacob’s part or as if he doesn’t want to say that he has gone. The form of expression communicates something of the way Benjamin is a “pawn” in the story.[[355]](#footnote-355)

**43:16-25.** On their arrival in Egypt there is again a first meeting with Joseph, which is overtly more friendly than its equivalent the previous time. Then, they had no reason to fear a grilling, but they got one, and had baseless and nonsensical charges made against them. This time, they have reason to fear a grilling, and instead they get an invitation to lunch. A formal meal of the kind that Joseph announces would look like an event to honor and celebrate the visitors, but they have no idea what is going on, and the event functions more like the return of their silver: it leaves them scared and bemused. Maybe “the man” has a prison attached to his house (cf. 39:20)….[[356]](#footnote-356) The audience might wonder whether Joseph is aiming at that effect, as part of seeking to work a change in them. But it again cannot guess what he is thinking.

In their anxiety (vv. 19-22) the brothers begin to defend themselves as soon as they enter the courtyard of Joseph’s house and before they have been accused of anything.[[357]](#footnote-357) Once again there is variation in the way the story is told: they speak of everyone finding their silver at the lodging place, which is a simpler version than the one in 42:26-35.

One would have thought that the steward (v. 23a) would have been involved in the return of the silver to them in 42:25, in which case he speaks here as someone who is part of the plot, whatever the plot was; perhaps he had assumed that his master was being inexplicably generous. He speaks to the brothers in terms strangely reminiscent of ones that someone in Jacob’s family might use: he refers to “your God, the God of your father,” in words most like those of Laban in 31:29. Ironically, when the first silver fell out of one of the bags, in 42:28, they had spoken in terms of what God had done, and now the steward confirms God’s involvement. His language invites the audience to see his words as more than a random or conventional comment. “God did not personally insert the money in their sacks (cf. 42:25), but because this human action was in tune with the divine purposes, one could claim God as the subject of the action.”[[358]](#footnote-358)

To their astonishment, out comes Simeon (vv. 23b-25), and in they go to get ready for this festive lunch, treated in the way appropriate to house guests.

**43:26-34.** As happened in Gen 42, a second meeting with Joseph follows. Once more there is bowing down, now in complete fulfillment of Joseph’s first dream and of the first part of his second dream with its eleven stars (37:5-9). That second dream has also spoken of the sun, and here Joseph goes on to ask about Jacob.

Then he lifts his eyes and looks at Benjamin (v. 29), which implies a deliberate permitting of himself to settle his eyes on his younger brother: compare this expression in 13:10, 14. Benjamin is the one who is not only his brother like the other ten but “his mother’s son.” We know from v. 16 that he had of course seen him when they all arrived, so that whereas he “asked” about how things were with Jacob, and the brothers told him, he has no need to “ask” about Benjamin; his rhetorical question about him needs no reply and gets none.

Once more the story does make clear one element in Joseph’s feelings (vv. 30-31), his affection for Benjamin. Once more, Joseph cries, and the narrator uses the word *raḥămîm*, which Jacob used in v. 14 (they are the only two occurrences in Genesis). It is the plural of the word for a womb in 20:18; 19:31; 30:22, which can thus point to a mother’s compassion for her children, but here suggests the fellow-feeling of two people born from the same womb. The paradox is that Joseph could at any point have assuaged his painful feelings by revealing his identity, but it seems that he has to wait until the work is done in the brothers—as God has to wait and live with his own pain on the way to the fulfillment of his purpose. “Joseph’s own anguished weeping provides an occasion to contemplate the mystery of God's sovereign participation in time. God himself endures the delay necessary for the fulfillment of the plan initiated in Abraham, an anguishing delay fraught with enmity and unbelief.”[[359]](#footnote-359)

We do not know wherein lay the offensiveness of the Hebrews (v. 32). Classical literature sometimes refers to the Egyptians’ chauvinism and Herodotus 2:41 notes that their regarding the cow as sacred meant (among other things) being unwilling to kiss Greeks,[[360]](#footnote-360) while Tg includes the explanation that the Hebrews ate the cattle that the Egyptians worshiped. But we have no evidence of a discipline about eating with foreigners on their part. Herodotus 2:47 also notes that the Egyptians agreed with the Israelites that the pig was defiling,[[361]](#footnote-361) and people listening to this story might be amused at the apparent reversal of common Israelite attitudes.

It is easy to imagine that the brothers are “stunned” by the entire event (vv. 33-34):[[362]](#footnote-362) usually the verb (*ḥāmāh*)denotes a negative astonishment. The experience continues to be too positive not to be worrying. If there is a particular reason for their astonishment, it is hardly their sitting in order of age; it might be that they sit “before” Joseph in a way that imperils that assumption about Egyptian convention that was presupposed by Joseph’s staff in v. 32, or it might be the favoring of the youngest guest which follows. But no worrying possibility seems to have “disturbed the party atmosphere.”[[363]](#footnote-363)

**44:1-2.** Notwithstanding the medieval chapter division, the story continues without a break with a further action on Joseph’s part that correspond to 42:25. That action seemed an act of generosity. This one is more spectacular, but adding the chalice seems odd. The silver plays no further role in events (TgPsJ has Judah referring to it, to tidy the matter up), though one may guess at reasons for its appearing here but not later. Perhaps it anticipates the gifts that Joseph will send with the brothers in due course: see especially 44:22. It also recalls the twenty silver pieces for which the brothers sold Joseph (37:25). Silver is a key motif in Gen 42—45;[[364]](#footnote-364) it almost qualifies for addition to the list of motifs that run through Gen 37—45.[[365]](#footnote-365) But anyway, the point about the eventual investigation is to isolate Benjamin not to convict everyone.[[366]](#footnote-366)

**44:3-13.** The account of the departure from Egypt and the journey back towards Canaan corresponds to 42:26-28 but takes a more elaborate form and has a contrasting outcome. Whereas Joseph had given the brothers a welcome that contrasted with their reception on the previous occasion, his action on sending them off contrasts with his action on the previous occasion in the opposite way. What is he seeking to achieve? But “Joseph’s strategy… now produces its master-stroke,” comparable to the judgment of Solomon.[[367]](#footnote-367)

After the unexpected banquet the day will have begun for the brothers (vv. 3-4) with a sense that everything was going far better than they could have hoped and with a sense of anticipation of getting home. For them and for the audience the reversal that follows is then devastating.[[368]](#footnote-368) Here the steward is explicitly part of the plot as Joseph continues to act in a way that would bemuse the audience and might give his brothers the impression that they are living in some Kafka-esque nightmare.

The chalice (vv. 5-6) was evidently used in the kind of divination that involves (e.g.) mixing oil and water or pouring flour on liquid, looking for the patterns that emerge, and then asking after the significance of the patterns in light of the way such patterns had appeared on other occasions. Such examination could then (e.g.) reveal whether someone might recover from illness or offer other insight on coming events.[[369]](#footnote-369) It might surprise the audience that Joseph practiced divination, which the Torah later bans (Lev 19:26), though it would be another example of people in Genesis being free to act in ways that the Torah will later forbid. But anyway, the Torah’s concern would be divination by means of processes that did not involve Yahweh; the Urim and Tummim were a form of divination, and the selection of Matthias eventually involved a not dissimilar process (Acts 1:26). But maybe it’s an open question whether Joseph actually practices divination or whether that idea is just part of the deceptive story tale that he spins. In 44:15 he implies that it was by divination that he knew about the chalice’s theft, which was not true though it would be a plausible claim for an Egyptian.[[370]](#footnote-370) Tg protects Joseph’s honor by describing him as “testing” rather than divining.

In their response (vv. 7-10) the brothers sidestep the point about divination and refer only to the chalice’s value. Declaring that any thief among them should be executed makes for an ironic parallel with 31:32—on that occasion there was a real thief, the mother of Joseph and Benjamin, but no exposure, here there is exposure but no real thief. Here as there the reference to execution is not a literal judicial declaration (we know of no Egyptian law that makes theft a capital offence) but a serious figurative affirmation of innocence. This declaration, along with the further affirmation that the rest of them should become servants to Joseph’s chief of staff (maybe here the word “slaves” would be appropriate), involves a hyperbole; it is a strong way of denying that there is such a person. The chief of staff (who is party to what has really happened) takes it that way but is more literal in his prescription of what will actually happen, and he accepts the principle that the individual who stole the chalice should be treated differently from the rest of the brothers. Both he and they assume the reality of individual responsibility while also recognizing that the individual lives in the context of the family. But he prescribes that the guilty person should become a servant to Joseph rather than being executed, and that they should be treated as innocent.

Dramatically (vv. 11-12), the narrator invites us to imagine the scene whereby the inevitable discovery happens and to imagine the brothers’ horror. The steward knows where the chalice is because he put it there, and so does the audience. But in the drama the investigation proceeds one by one towards the final denouement, in another parallel with the story of Laban and Rachel: see 31:25-34. “We are to imagine how the brothers exhale in relief ten times and are already sure of their sacks when the cup is found after all—in Benjamin’s sack.”[[371]](#footnote-371)

One might expect the brothers to react (v. 13) by turning on Benjamin and saying, “You thief, son of a woman-thief” (*GenR* 92:8). But they don’t. Notwithstanding the steward’s modification of their declaration about sharing in responsibility and punishment, they treat themselves as corporately implicated. Even if they are sure that they didn’t steal the chalice, the case against them would seem irrefutable. It is one reason why they tear their clothes, as they had once caused Jacob to (37:34). Perhaps the impossibility of returning to Jacob without Benjamin is one reason why they go back to the town. But their corporate grief, their accepting corporate responsibility, and their sticking with Benjamin hints at a change in their character.[[372]](#footnote-372)

# Genesis 44.14—45:28— How Joseph Makes Himself Known

## Overview

Joseph confronts the brothers and declares that as a penalty Benjamin must stay as his servant, but Judah pleads to be allowed to take his place because of the hurt Benjamin’s loss will cause to Jacob. Overwhelmed, Joseph reveals his identity, affirms how God’s purpose lay behind the brothers’ wrongdoing, and suggests that they come and live near him with his provision. Pharaoh backs the proposal and they go back to take the news to Jacob, who initially cannot believe it but eventually resolves to make the journey.

## Translation

44:14Yehudah and his brothers came to Yosep’s house. He was still there. They fell to the ground before him, 15and Yosep said to them, “What is this deed that you people have done? You know that a man like me does practice divination,[[373]](#footnote-373) don’t you.” 16Yehudah said, “What could we say to my lord? What could we speak? How could we show we are in the right? God has found out your servants’ waywardness. Here we are, servants to my lord, both we and the one in whose hand the chalice was found.” 17But he said, “A desecration[[374]](#footnote-374) for me to do this. The man in whose hand the chalice was found: he will become a servant to me. You people: go up with things being well, to your father.”

18Yehudah went up to him and said, “Excuse me, my lord, may your servant please speak a word in my lord’s ears, and may your anger not flame up at your servant, because you are the same as Par‘oh. 19My lord asked his servants, ‘Do you have a father or brother?’ 20and we said to my lord, ‘We have an elderly father and the child of his elderly years, little. In that his brother is dead, he alone remains of his mother’s, and his father loves him.’ 21You said to your servants, ‘Bring him down to me so I can set my eye on him.’[[375]](#footnote-375) 22We said to my lord, ‘The boy can’t abandon his father. Were he to abandon his father, he would die.’ 23But you said to your servants, ‘If the littlest of your brothers doesn’t come down with you, you will not see my face again.’ 24When we went up to your servant my father, we told him my lord’s words. 25Our father said, ‘Go back, get us a little by way of food supplies,’ 26and we said, ‘We can’t go down. If the littlest of our brothers is with us, we can go down, because we won’t be able to see the man’s face with the littlest of our brothers not being with us.’ 27Your servant my father said to us, ‘You yourselves know that my wife[[376]](#footnote-376) gave birth to two sons for me. 28One went away from me and I said, “Yes, he has been mauled to pieces.”[[377]](#footnote-377) I haven’t seen him until now. 29If you get this one from my presence as well and harm comes, you’ll send my gray hair down to Še’ol with things being bad.’

30When I now come to your servant my father and the boy is not with us, given that his life is bound up with his life, 31when he sees the boy is not there, he will die. Your servants will send your servant our father’s gray hair down to Še’ol with grief. 32Because your servant guaranteed the boy with my father, saying ‘If I don’t bring him back to you, I will be in the wrong in relation to my father for all time.’ 33So may your servant now please live as a servant to my lord instead of the boy, and the boy—may he go up with his brothers. 34Because how can I go up to my father with the boy not with me?—so that I do not see the bad fate that will come upon my father.”

45:1Yosep couldn’t control himself in front of all the people who were stationed with him. He called, “Get everyone out from being with me!” So no one stood with him when Yosep made himself known to his brothers. 2But he raised his voice as he cried, and the Miṣrayites heard, and Par‘oh’s household heard.

3So Yosep said to his brothers, “I’m Yosep! Is my father still alive?” His brothers couldn’t answer him because they were petrified at his presence. 4But Yosep said to his brothers, “Come up to me, please.” They came up and he said, “I’m Yosep your brother, whom you sold into Miṣrayim, 5but now, don’t be distressed, it’s not to cause rage in your eyes that you sold me here, because it was for the maintaining of life that God sent me before you. 6Because this has been two years of famine within the country, and there’ll be five more years when there is no plowing and reaping. 7And God sent me before you to put in place for you a group remaining in the country[[378]](#footnote-378) and to make you live as a big escape group.[[379]](#footnote-379) 8So now, it was not you who sent me here but God. He has put me in place as a father to Par‘oh and as lord of his entire household, ruler over the entire country of Miṣrayim.

9Hurry and go up to my father and say to him:

Your son Yosep has said this: God has put me in place as lord of all Miṣrayim. Come down to me, don’t stand about. 10You’ll live in the Gošen region and be near me, you and your children and your grandchildren, your flock, your herd, and all that’s yours. 11I’ll provide for you there, because there will be five more years of famine, so that you and your household and all that are yours aren’t in want.[[380]](#footnote-380)

12Here: your eyes can see and my brother Binyamin’s eyes can see that it’s my mouth that’s speaking to you. 13You’re to tell my father about all my honor in Miṣrayim and all that you have seen, and hurry and bring my father down here.” 14He fell on his brother Binyamin’s neck and cried, and Binyamin cried on his neck, 15and he kissed all his brothers and cried on them. And after that his brothers spoke with him.

16When the sound made itself heard in Par‘oh’s household, “Yosep’s brothers have come,” [[381]](#footnote-381) it was good in Par‘oh’s eyes of and in his servants’ eyes. 17Par‘oh said to Yosep, “Say to your brothers, ‘Do this: load your animals and go, come to the country of Kena‘an, 18get your father and your households, and come to me so I can give you the best of the country of Miṣrayim, and you can eat the fat of the country. 19You yourself are ordered, this is what to do: get for yourselves from the country of Miṣrayim wagons for your little ones and your wives, and carry your father and come. 20Your eye—it is not to look with sadness at your belongings, because the best of the entire country of Miṣrayim will be yours.’”

21Yiśra’el’s sons did so. Yosep gave them wagons in accordance with Par‘oh’s bidding and gave them provisions for the journey. 22To them all he gave changes of clothes for each person, and to Binyamin he gave three hundred pieces of silver and four or five[[382]](#footnote-382) changes of dress clothes.[[383]](#footnote-383) 23To his father he sent as follows: ten donkeys carrying some of the best things of Miṣrayim, and ten she-donkeys carrying grain, bread, and provisions for his father for the journey. 24So he sent his brothers off, and as they went, he said to them, “Don’t be agitated[[384]](#footnote-384) on the way.”

25So they went up from Miṣrayim and came to the country of Kena‘an to Ya‘aqob their father 26and told him, “Yosep is still alive, and actually he’s ruler over the entire country of Miṣrayim.” His heart went numb, because he didn’t believe them. 27But they spoke to him all Yosep’s words that he had spoken to them, and he saw the wagons that Yosep sent to carry him, and the spirit of Ya‘aqob their father came to life. 28Yiśra’el said, “Great,[[385]](#footnote-385) my son Yosep is still alive, I must go and see him before I die!”

## Interpretation

The main part of Scene 2B deviates from the pattern of Scene 1.[[386]](#footnote-386) Instead of the brothers getting home, initially they go back to the town to be confronted by Joseph. Judah makes an impassioned appeal to Joseph to be allowed to stay in Egypt in Benjamin’s place, and his appeal overwhelms Joseph. Gen 45 opens with a summary description of his revelation of himself, at which one could imagine the audience sitting dumbfounded. It has a moment to draw breath before the narrative gives a more detailed account and relate Pharaoh’s commission to go fetch Jacob. The brothers depart for Canaan, and the pattern disturbed at 44:3-13 comes to completion.

**44:14-17.** Judah comes first in the account of the brothers’ return, because it was he who had had the final word with Jacob about Benjamin which will now become important. If Joseph would commonly go off to do his work, he has stayed home waiting for the brothers to come back with their tails between their legs. Once again they fulfill his dream as they fall to the ground (cf. 37:5-10), though “fell” was not the verb there; it suggests a desperate prostration.

Joseph addresses them corporately (v. 15) rather than focusing on the individual apparent thief. He apparently implies that the theft of his chalice has not stopped him divining what has happened by some other means. He is of course lying again, all in the cause of the fulfillment of his dreams, the family’s survival, and his brothers’ transformation as they come to a new view of themselves.

That point is hinted by Judah’s declaration (v. 16) that “God has found out your servants’ waywardness.” On the brothers’ behalf, in his one statement about God he accepts that they share in some corporate responsibility for the wrongdoing,. But there was actually no waywardness, and anyway God would hardly need to find it out (as if he were ignorant of it), and is Judah assuming that Benjamin really did steal the chalice? The narrative sidesteps the question and the assumption that the discovery would surely have led to a protest by Benjamin (who as usual says nothing and does nothing) in favor of letting the statement suggest a kind of ironic displacement. What is really happening is that the brothers are finding out their own waywardness, expressed in the way they treated Joseph (and Jacob) long ago. So Judah’s statement compares with the statements and questions in 42:21-22 and 28, which express more truth than the speakers realize.

Joseph will not agree that they all pay the penalty (v. 17). Like the brothers and like his steward, Joseph assumes that the individual who stole the chalice has to suffer distinctive consequences, even if the brothers share in responsibility. The narrative tempts the audience to suspect that Joseph simply wants to keep his little brother in Egypt and get rid of the rest of the brothers.[[387]](#footnote-387) But his speaking as he does constitutes a further test for them. Are they willing to abandon Benjamin—who looks guilty but whom Joseph knows to be innocent?[[388]](#footnote-388) It is more than a test that reveals who they are. It is a temptation that gives them chance to grow.

**44:18.** MT begins a new unit here, which marks the pivotal nature of the address to Joseph which Judah now gives.[[389]](#footnote-389) Judah “goes up” to Joseph (the verb *nāgaš* suggests some deference).[[390]](#footnote-390)Hebegins with an appeal for a hearing which presupposes the recognition that he is taking a risk; he acknowledges that Joseph has the same absolute power as Pharaoh, to act against people in anger as Pharaoh did in 40:2-3, or to be merciful.[[391]](#footnote-391) In vv. 19-29 he will go on to review the events covered in Scene 2A, then in vv. 30-32 he will point out the inevitable results of Joseph’s proposed action, and in vv. 33-34 make an alternative proposal.

**44:19-29.** So the bulk of Judah’s poignant appeal summarizes the story so far. It is framed as an address designed to convince the supplies master, and it is fashioned to achieve this end, though one of its subtleties is that it is shaped to appeal to his compassion without ever explicitly doing so.[[392]](#footnote-392) It takes up phrase after phrase from conversations that have been reported earlier, with the recapitulation as usual noteworthy for what it repeats, for what it adds or for points at which it nuances and thus maintains interest, and for what it omits. It keeps referring to the servant status of the brothers and of Jacob in relation to Joseph; “servant” comes twenty times in the chapter.[[393]](#footnote-393) It thus again suggests a fulfilment of Joseph’s dreams: they are servants, he reigns or rules (37:8). On the other hand, it makes no mention of Joseph’s tough and unjustified treatment of the brothers on their first visit or of the detaining of Simeon. The address is mostly unnecessary in terms of conveying information about the events but it conveys an impression of Judah’s state of mind and of his understanding of Jacob’s. “This remarkable speech is a point-for-point undoing, morally and psychologically, of the brothers’ earlier violation of fraternal and filial bonds.” As well as accepting Jacob’s arbitrary favoritism, Judah demonstrates the deepest empathy for his father. He doesn’t want him to suffer the way he made him suffer before.[[394]](#footnote-394) Genesis makes no reference to repentance, but the First Testament often talks about or describes or presupposes repentance without using the word, and Judah’s address manifests the reality of repentance. It manifests *metanoia*. The time for a change of heart had to come. When it comes, there is no need for a call to repentance or a profession of repentance.[[395]](#footnote-395)

Resentment at Jacob’s favoritism thus gives way (vv. 20-24) to acceptance of what the two sons of Rachel meant to Jacob and what Benjamin meant to him now. Judah ironically makes explicit that Joseph is dead, even though he has less grounds for saying so than Jacob has. The idea that they can leave Benjamin behind and go back to Jacob “with things being well,” as Joseph said in v. 17, makes no sense. It would fulfill Jacob’s worst fear. Whereas Joseph reasonably described Benjamin as a man in v. 17, Judah speaks of him as the “little” son who is just a “boy.”[[396]](#footnote-396) Yes, he’s still just the kid brother. It’s odd that Judah speaks of Joseph wanting to set his eye on Benjamin, because this expression implies paying him special attention, for good or ill (e.g., Jer 24:6; Amos 9:4). Perhaps it’s a clever formulation.[[397]](#footnote-397) But it is just what Joseph wants to do.

In due course Judah comes back again (vv. 25-29) to Joseph’s question about the brothers’ father and mother and once again makes explicit that Benjamin is the only surviving son of his mother, the one whom Jacob calls “my wife,” as if she was the only one; Judah “thereby in effect delegitimizes himself.”[[398]](#footnote-398) He notes that Jacob is especially fond of Benjamin because his brother had been torn to pieces (!). Does Jacob’s comment about not having seen him since imply “some lingering doubt”?[[399]](#footnote-399) Anyway, Jacob had said he would die if he lost Benjamin. His life is bound up with Benjamin’s life, and Judah has guaranteed to bring him back. “The shadow of Joseph, who no longer lives but is present, lies across the speech and is revealed more and more as the really troubling factor…. Because Joseph is gone, the loss of the second favorite son would inevitably destroy the father.” [[400]](#footnote-400)

**44:30-34.** The review is over and Judah comes to its implications. He can’t face seeing how Jacob would react if he returned without Benjamin. Finally he comes to his concrete request, that he rather than Benjamin may stay as Joseph’s servant—the position into which he had once proposed they sell Joseph. Events have had the effect they needed to have on Judah, who goes much further than he did in 37:26-27.

**45:1-2**. “Now, finally, after such a long climb, the narrative has reached the climax.”[[401]](#footnote-401) The pathos of Judah’s appeal finally overcomes Joseph, though he knows it would be indiscrete to lose control of himself before everyone. Whether or not Joseph could have forgiven his brothers irrespective of whether they repented, the change of mind and heart implied by Judah’s words means that mutual reconciliation and the restoring of the family relationship is now a possibility. Once again, Genesis gives us a summary in vv. 1-2 which vv. 3-15 and vv. 16-20 respectively will elaborate.

**45:3-8.** The elaboration of the brief account goes back first to relate Joseph’s actual announcement. Whereas he had previously asked about “your father,” now his incredulous question concerns “my father.”[[402]](#footnote-402) He knows the answer to his opening question and it receives no reply, like his rhetorical question about Benjamin in 44:29. Judah had referred to their father fourteen times, which maybe was one element in his address that “shook Joseph and brought his self-restraint to an end.”[[403]](#footnote-403) Not surprisingly nor unreasonably, his brothers assume they are being flung into another stage of their Kafka-esque drama.

Joseph picks up the verb “come up” (vv. 4-5a) which described Judah’s deferential approach in 44:18. While Judah had there ventured to approach Joseph, the main body of the brothers would be standing at a respectful distance from the Egyptian official. He urges them to come nearer to this man who is now going to tell them who he really is. They are not to be caused pain by facing what they have done—Joseph uses the word for the pain involved in motherhood and in farming (3:16-17). And they are not to be furious with themselves over it.

The reason (vv. 5b-6) is that they were fulfilling God’s purpose, even if unwittingly. God was behind their actions. The reality of this dynamic is a further consideration in enabling Joseph to be so forgiving towards his brothers and to refer to their action without being resentful about it.[[404]](#footnote-404) “In this speech of Joseph, the power of the conspiracy of chapter 37 is broken.”[[405]](#footnote-405) When he refers to what they did to him, he does so in order to rob it of this power. God had sent Joseph, and they were the means of the sending. God had so acted for the sake of the maintaining of life, given that for two more years there’ll be plowing but not reaping (plowing-and-reaping is a hendiadys).[[406]](#footnote-406) Perhaps Joseph becomes aware only now of this dynamic whereby God has been at work through the brothers’ action. But his recalling his dream when the brothers first showed up (42:9) rather suggests that his maneuvering of them was designed to relate to that dynamic and to bring them to the point when it can be articulated. Retrospectively, one can thus see that this insight into God’s purpose and way of operating underlay the story of his testing his brothers. It is now apparent that the dreams in Gen 37 pointed in this direction and that God has been long working to that end, as an aspect of his commitment to maintain life. But Genesis itself is more interested in the way the grim sequence of events that it relates contributed to the fulfillment of that aim than in who knew what when and what was their motivation.

God’s purpose (v. 7) was to make sure that a group from Jacob’s family remained in Egypt, in the context of the widespread famine in the region. Joseph introduces the expression *šᵉ’ērît*, commonly translated “remnant,” which would ring bells for people listening to the story (e.g., Jer 23:3; Amos 5:15). When they were reduced to a remnant of their former selves, it would be tempting for them to wonder whether they would survive; Joseph reassures them that God’s purpose for them to survive goes way back to the vulnerability of their beginning. “As often in the Old Testament, ‘remnant” is a word of hope.”[[407]](#footnote-407) To underscore the point, he adds the term *pᵉlîṭāh*, which appears elsewhere in parallelism with *šᵉ’ērît* (Ezra 9:14; Isa 37:32). Joseph sets the two words against each other by talking in terms of “a big escape group.” While God’s plan was to preserve the relatively small group comprising the family of Jacob, it was also to turn them into a huge people. That promise will be reformulated in even more spectacular terms in 46:3 and realized in between Genesis and Exodus (see Exod 1:1-7). The “maintaining of life” (*miḥyāh*) of which he spoke in v. 5 which would mean he will “make them live” (*ḥāyāh* hiphil) will not mean merely keeping them (barely) alive or saving them from losing their life. At one level that project would not require the brothers to come to recognize what they had done, to own it, and to become reconciled with Joseph. “What God has done stands *independent of the brothers’ repentance,*”[[408]](#footnote-408) but at another level making them live and enabling them to fulfill the destiny of the remnant requires that development. The future of the family requires it.

Joseph is able to be the means of that maintaining of life (v. 8) because he has become a kind of father to Pharaoh—that is, a counselor who can give him wise advice (cf. 2 Kings 6:21; 13:14), like the father who instructs his “sons” in Proverbs. As the brothers know (42:30, 33), he has been put in control of the country’s economy and has thus become the most powerful figure in the country. So he is a position to see that his family is looked after there. He is ruler not merely over them (see 37:8) but over all Egypt.

**45:9-15.** Now that the testing his brothers is over Joseph can urge them to get back to Jacob quickly and give him the news, which he does by dictating a message in the manner of the administrator that he is.

If Goshen (vv. 10-11) is a Hebrew equivalent to Kesem or Gesem (LXX has Gesem) in Wadi Tumilat in the eastern delta of the Nile,[[409]](#footnote-409) it is a region with several advantages. It is good pastureland, near Canaan and therefore easy to leave if and when leaving should become desirable (as it will!), and near the centers of Egyptian administration where Joseph would be based. The entire family of Jacob is to come—by now Joseph’s brothers would have children, like Joseph himself—and its herds and flocks. They will be there at least five years. “Living” (*yāšab*) need not imply being there permanently; Jacob’s mother used this verb to denote the short term stay that she ironically envisaged for him (27:44). In the event the family’s stay will be much longer. Jacob and Joseph will always envisage the family’s return to Canaan, but they will never attempt it and will talk only of God taking them back, as God is taking them to Egypt. For people listening to the story, Joseph’s reference to being in want would imply a paronomasia and a link with the talk of a remnant and a big escape group, since the verb for being in want (*yāraš*) is a homonym for a much more common one that denotes possession and dispossession, and possessing land (in Goshen) was another important aspect of God’s dealings with Jacob’s descendants and a theme that has already been important in Genesis (15:1-8; 21:10; 22:17; 28:4).

The brothers have been standing there open-mouthed (vv. 12-15), hardly able to believe their ears. They have been unable to speak since v. 3, with its hint at a reasonable suspicion that they are the victims of another trick. But Joseph’s words have by now convinced them that they can take him at face value. Tg makes explicit that he would now presumably be speaking in their own language rather than communicating via an interpreter as he was previously. So now here can be mutual embracing; for Joseph, the reunion with his full brother Benjamin is of particular significance. And now their mouths can open.

**45:16-20**. The summary account of the reunion in vv. 1-2 has already reported that the noise in Joseph’s office reached the palace. The narrative now elaborates on that report and on Pharaoh’s reaction. The plural “households” again recognizes that brother has his own family, except perhaps “little” Benjamin. The overlap between vv. 3-15 and 16-20 suggests we need not see the two as simply sequential. Verses 3-15 will summarize conversations over a little while which will have interwoven with the conversations reported now.

**45:21-24.** Likewise Pharaoh’s instructions are implemented with features unmentioned in vv. 16-20 which might or might not have been added by Joseph. The new sets of robes are likely not merely changes of clothes but garments of the kind that one would wear on festive occasions (cf. 2 Kings 5:50).[[410]](#footnote-410) Now everyone has one, not just Joseph as was the case at the beginning of the story.[[411]](#footnote-411) Given the way Joseph has been playing games with his brothers and the mind-blowing nature of what has now happened, one can imagine that they might get twitchy on the way home. And later events will make it clear that they do indeed still have some “residual doubt about the extent to which they have been forgiven” (see 50:15-18).[[412]](#footnote-412)

**45:25-28.** At last the narrator can bring to an end the sequence which occupies Gen 43--45 and parallels the one in 41:57—42:38, though again the report both matches and sharply contrasts with the equivalent one in 42:29-38.

And one can imagine that Jacob finds the report too much to believe (v. 26). The brothers’ report has a paralyzing effect on him. It is inviting him to think of a possibility that he would love to be real but cannot contemplate, so that he is more disturbed after the brothers flaunt this impossible possibility before him than he was when he had been assuming for years that Joseph was dead. “What other word does a father ever want to hear except, ‘My son is alive’?”[[413]](#footnote-413) But whereas he had believed his sons when they were lying (37:31-35), he can’t believe them when they are telling the truth.[[414]](#footnote-414) “Look at what happens to a liar. Even when he tells the truth, people do not believe him” (*GenR* 94:3).

Repetition and visual evidence bring Jacob back to life (vv. 27-28). He has more than once spoken of going down to Sheol with sorrow (37:35; 42:38; twice further as quoted by Judah, 44:29, 31). Now he can talk about Joseph and about death in a more positive way. His life has been dominated by grief for years, but as he gets nearer the end of his life he finds relief, not because he grows out of it but because God has mercy.

## Joseph and Judah

Although Gen 36—50 is the account of Jacob’s lines of descent, this account focuses on Joseph and Judah. The story of each of these brothers is told in a dynamic way, but not the same dynamic way.

The dynamic of Joseph’s story lies in the manner of its telling. There is no clear indication of change in Joseph during the story. The dynamic lies in the gradual process whereby the audience is able to discover the truth about him. It is the kind of story that gives the audience clues as it goes along but also leaves questions open so that it leaves itself susceptible to different interpretations until the story comes to an end. From the end one can then look back and make sense of all the clues. They now make a picture. The questions are answered. In isolation the initial account of Joseph does not indicate whether the dreams are wish-fulfillment on the part of a bumptious teenager. And the middle of the story with its account of the tough experience he puts his brothers through does not indicate whether he is simply getting his own back. And neither bumptiousness nor vengefulness can be totally ruled out. But on one hand, the end of the story suggests that the dream relates to God’s having an intention to do something good. It was God who sent Joseph to Egypt ahead of his brothers. And Joseph’s recurrent crying suggests that he was not merely engaged in getting his own back on the brothers. He was working towards their coming to own what they had done. It’s been said that at the other end of Genesis from Adam, Joseph succeeds in many ways where Adam failed.[[415]](#footnote-415) Or perhaps Joseph succeeds where Cain failed, if a key question in Gen 37—50 is “who is your brother?”[[416]](#footnote-416)

The dynamic of Judah’s story lies not in the telling, which is more straightforward. His story does not raise questions that it declines to answer as it goes along, as Joseph’s story does. The dynamic of Judah’s story lies in what happens to him. He appears three times. In Gen 37 he is keen to avoid killing Joseph, but chiefly because he is afraid of the consequences and prefers the idea of making some money through selling him. In Gen 38 he engages in a questionable marriage, lets down his daughter-in-law, and gets into a mess with a whore, but she opens him up to a revelatory insight about himself. In Gen 43 he is prepared to accept responsibility for seeing that Benjamin visits Egypt safely. And in Gen 44 he makes the fervent appeal to Joseph in which he offers to take Benjamin’s place in servitude, whose evidence of being a changed man stirs Joseph into revealing who he really is.

On the basis of the dynamic of the story, it is apposite that Judah and Joseph should be prominent in Jacob’s testament. Although the imagery used of them is different, its implications are similar. For the victories he will win, Judah is now promised the recognition by his brothers that had been Joseph’s destiny in his dreams; Joseph’s courage and vigor are likewise affirmed. Both Judah and Joseph are promised that they will flourish. Both will need to keep his own story in mind. The great Judahite, David, will need to do so, but so will the Judah that declines and eventually finds itself a shadow of its former self in the Babylonian and Persian periods. The northern Israel nation will need to do so when it is flourishing and then when it is reduced almost to nothing in the Assyrian, Babylonian ,and Persian periods.

What is the significance of God not appearing to Joseph and not speaking to him? Joseph is not the head of the ancestral clan; nor is he a prophet. He is closer to being an ordinary guy. He lives in between Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob on one hand, and Moses on the other. He embodies the way God can be involved with an ordinary guy.

# Genesis 46.1—47:26— How Joseph Settles His Family and Rescues the Egyptians

## Overview

The last part of the story of Jacob’s lines of descent covers the time spent by Jacob and his family in Egypt. Jacob stops at Beer Sheba, where God appears to him, but he eventually reaches Egypt. A list of the people who made the journey follows. The section goes on to recount the family’s arrival in Goshen, Jacob’s reunion with Joseph, a meeting of some of the brothers with Pharaoh, and his confirmation of where they can settle. It then recounts how Joseph rescues the Egyptian people through implementing a system whereby the state administers grain and controls land.

## Translation

46:1So Yiśra’el moved with all that was his and came to Be’er Šeba, and offered sacrifices to the God of his father Yiṣḥāq.

2God said to Yiśra’el in visions[[417]](#footnote-417) at night, “Ya‘aqob, Ya‘aqob!” He said, “I’m here.” 3He said, “I am God, the God of your father. Don’t be afraid of going down to Miṣrayim, because I will establish you as a big nation there. 4I myself will go down with you to Miṣrayim and I myself will also definitely bring you up[[418]](#footnote-418) from there, when Yosep puts his hand on your eyes.”

5So Ya‘aqob set off from Be’er Šeba. Yiśra’el’s sons carried their father Ya‘aqob, their little ones, and their wives in the wagons that Par‘oh had sent to carry him. 6They got their livestock and their property that they had acquired in the country of Kena‘an, and Ya‘aqob and all his offspring with him came to Miṣrayim. 7His sons and his grandsons with him, his daughters and his granddaughters—all his offspring he brought with him to Miṣrayim.

8These are the names of the descendants of Yiśra’el who came to Miṣrayim, Ya‘aqob and his descendants:

Ya‘aqob’s firstborn: Re’uben; 9Re’uben’s sons: Ḥanok, Pallu, Heṣron, and Karmi.

10Šim‘on’s sons: Yemu’el,[[419]](#footnote-419) Yamin, Ohad, Yakin, Ṣohar,[[420]](#footnote-420) and Ša’ul, the son of a Kena‘anite woman.

11Lewi’s sons: Geršon, Qehat, and Merari.

12Yehudah’s sons: Er, Onan, Šelah, Pereş, and Zerah (but Er and Onan had died in the country of Kena‘an); Pereş’s sons were Ḥeşron and Ḥamul.

13Yiśśakar’s sons: Tola, Puwwah, Yob,[[421]](#footnote-421) and Šimron.

14Zebulun’s sons: Sered, Elon, and Yaḥle’el.

15These are the sons of Le’ah, to whom she gave birth for Ya‘aqob in Paddan Aram, with his daughter Dinah. Every person, his sons and his daughters:[[422]](#footnote-422) thirty-three.

16Gad’s sons: Ṣipyon,[[423]](#footnote-423) Ḥaggi, Šuni, Eṣbon,[[424]](#footnote-424) Arodi, and Ar’eli.

17Ašer’s sons: Yimnah, Yišwah,[[425]](#footnote-425) Yišwi, and Beri‘ah; Seraḥ their sister; and Beri‘ah’s sons: Ḥeber and Malki’el.

18These are the sons of Zilpah, whom Laban gave to his daughter Le’ah. She gave birth to these for Ya‘aqob, sixteen persons.

19The sons of Ya‘aqob’s wife Raḥel: Yosep and Binyamin.

20To Yosep were born in the country of Miṣrayim, to whom Asenat the daughter of Poti Pera, the priest of On, gave birth for him: Menaššeh and Eprayim.

21Binyamin’s sons: Bela, Beker, Ašbel, Gera, Na‘aman, Eḥi, Ro’š, Muppim, Ḥuppim, and Ard.[[426]](#footnote-426)

22These are the sons of Raḥel who were born to Ya‘aqob. Every person: fourteen.

23Dan’s sons:[[427]](#footnote-427) Ḥušim.[[428]](#footnote-428)

24Naptali’s sons: Yaḥze’el, Guni, Yeṣer, and Šillem.

25These are the sons of Bilhah, whom Laban gave to his daughter Raḥel. She gave birth to these for Ya‘aqob. Every person: seven.

26Every person who came belonging to Ya‘aqob to Miṣrayim, the people who went out of his loins, apart from the wives of Ya‘aqob’s sons, every person: sixty-six; 27Yosep’s sons, a person who was born to him in Miṣrayim: two; every person belonging to Ya‘aqob’s household who came to Miṣrayim: seventy.

28Yehudah he sent before him to Yosep, to give instructions[[429]](#footnote-429) before him to Gošen. So they came to the Gošen region, 29and Yosep harnessed his chariot and went up to meet Yiśra’el his father, to Gošen. He appeared to him, fell on his neck, and cried on his neck again and again.[[430]](#footnote-430) 30Yiśra’el said to Yosep, “I can die[[431]](#footnote-431) now, after I’ve seen your face, that you’re still alive.”

31Yosep said to his brothers and to his father’s household, “I’ll go up[[432]](#footnote-432) and tell Par’oh: I’ll say to him, ‘My brothers and my father’s household, who were in the country of Kena‘an – they’ve come to me. 32The men are shepherds of a flock, because they’ve been livestock men, and their flock and their herd and all that’s theirs, they’ve brought.’ 33When Par‘oh calls you and says, ‘What’s your work,’ 34you’re to say, ‘Your servants have been livestock men from our youth until now, both we and our forebears’[[433]](#footnote-433)—so you may live in the Gošen region, because every shepherd of a flock is an offense to Miṣrayites.”

47:1So Yosep came and told Par’oh, “My father and my brothers, and their flock and their herd and all that’s theirs – they’ve come from the country of Kena‘an. There, they’re in the Gošen region.” 2From the total number[[434]](#footnote-434) of his brothers he got four or five,[[435]](#footnote-435) and presented them before Par‘oh. 3Par‘oh said to his brothers, “What is your work?” They said to Par’oh, “Your servants are shepherd of a flock, both we and our forebears.” 4They said to Par’oh, “It’s to reside as aliens[[436]](#footnote-436) in the country that we’ve come, because there’s no pasture for your servants’ flock, because the famine is severe in the country of Kena‘an, so now may your servants please live in the Gošen region.” 5Par‘oh said to Yosep, “As your father and your brothers have come to you, 6the country of Miṣrayim is before you. Have your father and your brothers live in the best part of the country. They should live in the Gošen region, and if you know that there are capable men among them, make them livestock officials over all that’s mine.”[[437]](#footnote-437)

7Yosep brought his father Ya‘aqob and got him to stand before Par’oh, and Ya‘aqob blessed Par‘oh. 8Par‘oh said to Ya‘aqob, “What is the span of[[438]](#footnote-438) the years of your life?” 9Ya‘aqob said to Par’oh, “The span of the years of my residing as an alien is one hundred and thirty. Little and bad has been the span of the years of my life; it has not reached the span of the years of my forebears’ lives during the span of their residing.” 10Ya‘aqob blessed Par‘oh and went out from Par‘oh’s presence.

11Yosep had his father and his brothers live, and gave them a holding, in the country of Miṣrayim, in the best part of the country, in the Ra’meses region, as Par‘oh ordered. 12Yosep provided his father, his brothers, and his father’s entire household with bread, for the mouth of each little one.

13There being no bread in the entire world[[439]](#footnote-439) because the famine was very severe, the country of Miṣrayim and the country of Kena‘an suffered[[440]](#footnote-440) in of the famine. 14Yosep collected[[441]](#footnote-441) all the silver to be found in the country of Miṣrayim and in the country of Kena‘an in payment for the grain supplies that they were buying. Yosep brought the silver to Par‘oh’s house. 15So the silver from the country of Miṣrayim and from the country of Kena‘an came to an end, and all Miṣrayim came to Yosep saying, “Hand over bread to us: why should we die in front of you, because silver is gone.” 16Yosep said, “Hand over[[442]](#footnote-442) your livestock, and I will give to you in exchange for your livestock, if there’s no silver.” 17So they brought their livestock to Yosep and Yosep gave them bread in exchange for the horses, for the livestock in the flock, for the livestock in the herd, and for the donkeys. He nurtured[[443]](#footnote-443) them with bread in exchange for all their livestock that year.

18That year came to an end, and they came to him the second year and said to him, “We won’t hide from my lord, but the silver has come to an end, and the animal stock belong to my lord: there’s nothing left before my lord except our corpses[[444]](#footnote-444) and our land. 19Why should we die before your eyes, both we and our land?[[445]](#footnote-445) Acquire us and our land in exchange for bread. We ourselves and our land will become serfs to Par‘oh. Give seed, so we may live and not die, and the land not become desolate.”

20So Yosep acquired all the land in Miṣrayim for Par’oh, because Miṣrayim, each person, sold their fields because the famine prevailed over them, and the country came to belong to Par‘oh. 21And the people: he caused it to move into the towns[[446]](#footnote-446) from one end of Miṣrayim’s border to its other end. 22However, he didn’t acquire the priests’ land, because the priests had something prescribed by Par‘oh and they ate their prescription that Par‘oh gave them. Thus they didn’t sell their land.

23Yosep said to the people, “There, today I have acquired you and your land for Par‘oh. Here is seed for you. You’ll sow the land, 24and with the ingatherings you will give a fifth to Par’oh, but four-fifths—it will be yours, as seed for the fields and as food for you and for those in your households, and for eating by your little ones.” 25They said, “You’ve kept us alive—should we find[[447]](#footnote-447) favor in the eyes of my lord, we will become serfs to Par‘oh.” 26Yosep made it a statute, until this day, for the land in Miṣrayim: a fifth is Par‘oh’s. However, the priests’ land alone did not become Par‘oh’s.

## Interpretation

Within the story of Jacob’s line in Gen 37—50 as a whole, we noted that Gen 41 faces both ways as it marks the transition from Act One to Act Two. Gen 46:1—47:26 likewise faces both ways as it marks the transition from Act Two to Act Three. It forms the conclusion to the main Joseph story, though viewed purely in this connection it may seem an “anticlimax” after Gen 43—45.[[448]](#footnote-448) It also constitutes the beginning of Act Three, which takes Jacob and his family to Egypt and relates his blessing of them and his death there. It thus reasserts the fact that Genesis Part Four is the story of Jacob’s lines of descent. Gen 46:1—47:26 comprises a set of separate pieces juxtaposed without many connecting markers, rather than a continuous story like Gen 37—45, and seeing it as a unit is a less objective conclusion than is the case with many other units. MT has a paragraph break after 46:7 then begins a new unit after 46:27 and another after 47:31. A new synagogue parashah (lection) begins after 47:27.

Gen 46:1-7 begins the process of reestablishing the fact that that Gen 36—50 is the story of Jacob’s lines of descent with its opening account of God appearing to Jacob, giving a commission to him and making a promise to him. In form and significance the commission and promise parallel the ones to his grandfather (12:1-3) and they thus mark this passage as part of the story of Israel’s ancestors and not part of the Joseph story.[[449]](#footnote-449) They look beyond the horizon of Jacob’s own life, yet do so in a way that speaks of what God will do for Jacob himself, because his story leads into the transition from the story of the ancestors to the story in Exodus: “the twilight of Israel the man coincides with the dawn of Israel the nation.”[[450]](#footnote-450) The beginning of Act Three is then also marked by a list of who the family comprises, in 46:8-27.

Narrative then resumes in 46:28—47:26. It describes in more detail the family’s arrival in Goshen and the reunion of Jacob and Joseph and thus takes up the retrospective aspect to 46:1—47:12. It relates Joseph’s plan for the family’s settlement (46:28-34)then goes on to Joseph’s presenting some of his brothers and his father to Pharaoh and Jacob’s blessing of Pharaoh (47:1-12).

By now we might have forgotten the crisis that brought about the reunion between Joseph and his family and brought Jacob’s family to Egypt. It was a crisis that spelled disaster for every family in Egypt and Canaan, which was effectively part of Egypt’s empire. Gen 47:13-26 presupposes that Joseph has already acquired the surplus grain over the seven years of good harvests. He now sells it to the people and thus acquires all the silver (the financial resources) in Egypt and Canaan. When the people have no silver to buy grain, he barters them grain for their livestock. When they have no more livestock, he barters them grain for the ownership of their land, so that they become state sharecroppers. The story thus raises logistical questions, among others. Joseph collected all the silver in Egypt and Canaan? People brought all the livestock in Egypt to Joseph? Joseph moved all the people into the towns?[[451]](#footnote-451) It seems unlikely that the audience would be interested in the origin of the Egyptian tax system or the system of land tenure. They would more likely be interested in this account as a further example of Joseph’s smartness, and they would either rejoice in his rescuing the Egyptians from starvation and/or grin at the way he was able to turn them into state serfs. They might have asked “Well how did Joseph’s advice to Pharaoh turn out, then?”—in other words, the wider story needs this last episode to tie it off. Joseph by his wisdom saves the people from a giant catastrophe. [[452]](#footnote-452) As Jacob blessed Pharaoh, Joseph makes it possible for the people of Egypt to survive the famine. As Joseph made it possible for his family to live and not die (42:2; 43:8), so he did for the people of Egypt (47:19). As God took action to ensure that Jacob’s family stayed alive and even flourished for the future (45:7; 50:20), Joseph took action to ensure that the people of Egypt stayed alive and even flourished for the future (47:25). The story would also provide background to the deplorable account of the Pharaoh who didn’t acknowledge Joseph (Exod 1:8).

Is it possible to locate the arrival of a group such as Jacob’s family and/or action such as Joseph’s in Egyptian history? Through much of the second millennium there was interplay between Egypt and Canaan which could involve the exercise of Canaanite power in Egypt (particularly in the Nile Delta area, nearer Canaan) as well as the exercise of Egyptian power in Canaan. One might hypothesize that in some of these periods the Egyptians might well allow a Canaanite group to enter Egypt in the way Genesis describes, and the system of state-controlled land tenure and the special treatment of priests fits evidence from Egypt in some periods. In this context the scenario in Gen 37—50 is thus plausible in general terms, though we do not have a basis for linking it with a particular period.[[453]](#footnote-453)

**46:1-7**. Yet again Genesis summarizes an event, in v. 1, before narrating the details in vv. 2-7. Gen 37—45 has referred to Jacob as Israel a few times (37:3, 13; 42:5; 43:6, 8, 11; 45:21, 28), apparently randomly. Here in vv. 1-2 the double reference looks deliberate, especially given the contrast with God’s own double use of the name Jacob. It is the family that will become the nation of Israel in Egypt that is making the move to Egypt at this point.

Jacob was presumably in Hebron (v. 1) (see 35:27; 37:14). He is not setting out on a short-term sojourn in Egypt of the kind that Abraham made but taking everything that he has. Moving south off the mountain ridge, he first comes to Beer Sheba, a day or two’s journey, and the traditional southernmost point of the promised land (“from Dan to Beer Sheba”). Continuing west from there implies a commitment to moving into foreign territory. Further, Beer Sheba had been a significant center for Abraham, and even more for Isaac, and it had been the starting point for Jacob’s move to Harran (28:10). His “sacrifices” (*zᵉbāḥîm*), the only ones in Gen 12—50 apart from 31:54, are offerings shared between God and the offerers, unlike whole burnt offerings (see Gen 22). Such sacrifices link more with answers to prayer than with petitions.[[454]](#footnote-454) These sacrifices will thus be responses to the revelation that Genesis is about to report, rather than vice versa. The description of them is part of the way v. 1 comprises a summary of what vv. 2-7 will elaborate.

Perhaps it’s not surprising that God appears to him at Beer Sheba (v. 2), given the various significances of that place. God’s appearing also recalls his appearing to Abraham when he arrived in Canaan and subsequently built an altar there (12:7), his appearing to Isaac who subsequently built this altar in response to God’s appearing to him (26:24-25), and his appearing to Jacob when he was on his way out of the land northwards and subsequently set up a standing stone (28:18). Yet this “vision” (*mar’āh*) is the only one mentioned in Genesis, though 15:1 used another word with this meaning (*maḥăzeh*)in connection with a night vision, and Yahweh did “appear” here (*rā’āh* niphal) at night in 26:24 (cf. 12:7; 17:1; 18:1; 26:2; 35:1, 9). As it is a vision and it’s at night, the implications are not very different from Jacob dreaming (28:12); Genesis more often refers to dreams than to visions. Paradoxically, especially as “visions” is plural, Genesis will speak only of what Jacob heard; the event again parallels Yahweh’s appearing to Isaac when he built this altar (26:24). The implications of “vision” thus parallel those of the English word “revelation”; TgPsJ says that God “spoke to Israel in a prophecy of the night.” God speaks with the double address, “Jacob, Jacob” that Yahweh’s envoy used to Abraham (22:11). It is not a moment with the same urgency as obtained there, but the doubling implies some insistence and the importance of what God is about to say. Jacob replies in the proper fashion of a servant or a son, “I’m here,” like Abraham in 22:11 (see also e.g., 22:1; 31:11). If the language is “stylized,” it’s because the emphasis lies on the commission and the promise that follow.[[455]](#footnote-455)

On this occasion Genesis has God saying “I am God [*hā’ēl*]” (v. 3a) not “I am Yahweh,” in accordance with proper historical theology (contrast 28:13). This passage and Jacob’s report in 31:13 are the only occasions that Genesis uses the expression *hā’ēl*. In 31:13 God qualified the self-description by referring to himself as the Bethel God (which thus makes a link as well as a contrast with 28:13). This time he qualifies it by reminding Jacob that he is “the God of your father” who built the altar at Beer Sheba. It’s the title for God that Jacob himself had used as he recalled how God had been with him (31:5; cf. 31:42, 53) and the title that is his distinctive way of referring to God.

“Don’t be afraid,” God says again (v. 3b), as he had said to Isaac there at Beer Sheba when he built the altar (26:24), and as he had earlier said to Abraham (15:1).[[456]](#footnote-456) In light of the way Jacob experienced the God of his father proving himself to him on that long journey northeast, he has reason to trust in this God for his journey southwest. The exhortation to trust addressed to Abraham and Isaac was associated with a promise that the addressee would be the father of many descendants, and so it is here, but in the context of Jacob’s leaving the land (again)—though there has been no indication that Jacob was afraid. Was he wondering whether it is really okay to be leaving Canaan?[[457]](#footnote-457) God declares that he will establish Jacob as a big nation there, which picks up not only God’s declaration concerning Abraham (12:2; 18:18) but more recently Joseph’s talk of God establishing this family as a great escape group (45:7). It will happen *there*,in Egypt! That word “there” is a key variant on Yahweh’s promise to Abraham. It seems an implausible notion, but the beginning of Exodus will indicate that God has done what he says.

The promise to be with Jacob (v. 4) is familiar (e.g., 26:2 [in connection with not going down to Egypt], 23; 28:15; 31:3). Here, too, there is a needed modification of the familiar formulation: the familiar language about being “with you” is nuanced with a reference to going down to Egypt. Although Canaan was the country that God intended to give to Jacob’s family, Jacob hardly needed any reminder that God was not confined to Canaan. He had proved it many times over, and this fact about God was deeply embedded in his family’s story. In a nice ambiguity the promise about going down and bringing back sounds in English like a promise referring to Jacob and his family, with the implication that the “exodus” will coincide with his return.[[458]](#footnote-458) The promise understood thus will then find paradoxical fulfillment as it will transpire that Jacob’s return and the family’s return happen so differently and so separately. But the “you” is singular; it refers solely to Jacob. Again it will find paradoxical fulfillment as Jacob will indeed come back but only as a dead man, as the last clause in the verse implies. The outworking of the promise is nevertheless the assurance that Jacob will not be stuck in Egypt forever. The promise presupposes that Jacob will be okay about returning only after his death. He will have seen Joseph again, and Joseph will be in a position to close Jacob’s eyes when he dies. And returning as a dead man counts as returning. Jacob will rest in the promised land forever. God’s promise to Jacob again compares and contrasts with his promise to Abraham in 15:13-16. Abraham knew that his family would be resident aliens and serfs somewhere but would eventually return to the promised land, while he himself would die in Canaan. Yahweh’s promise to Jacob speaks of the family’s becoming a big nation in the foreign land that is now specified but only of Jacob’s returning. If leaving the land that he knows and leaving the land of promise is a frightening venture which makes him fear he will never come back and will be buried in a foreign land, he is reassured.[[459]](#footnote-459) Thus he has reason to offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving.

The entire family and all its possessions therefore moves on Egypt (vv. 5-7). Once again Genesis gives a summary account in its reporting of the journey; both the list and the further narrative in 46:8—47:12 will elaborate on this summary. The names Jacob and Israel again interweave, and the reference to daughters and grandchildren also suggests a change of focus, from the immediate family to the people into which it will grow. The word “offspring,” which commonly refers to more than merely someone’s immediate family, makes the same point; it occurs for the first time since the promise in 35:12 (cf. also e.g., 12:7; 13:15-16; 15:5, 13; 22:17-18; 26:3-4).[[460]](#footnote-460)

**46:8-27**. The alternating of the names Israel and Jacob continues: it is Jacob who is moving to Egypt, but he does so as the ancestor of the people of Israel. The list of sons is the same as that in 29:31—30:24 (Dinah also again gets a mention) but the order has a different rationale. There it iinterweaves the chronological and the systematic; here it is more consistently systematic.

1. The six sons of Leah, plus Dinah (vv. 8-15)
2. The two sons of Leah’s maidservant Zilpah (vv. 16-18)
3. The two sons of Rachel (vv. 19-22)
4. The two sons of Rachel’s maidservant Bilhah (vv. 23-26).

The basic shape of the presentation is systematic in some other ways, as is suggested by the arrangement of the translation as printed above. Ten lines begin with the name of one of Jacob’s sons and then give a list of this son’s sons; the formulation is slightly different for Rachel’s sons. After the lists of sons comes the mother’s name, along with the sum total of the descendants born through that mother. Qualifying this systematic arrangement are some nuances, a number of which make clear that only in a broad sense is it a list of the family that came down to Egypt.

* In v. 8, the first line notes that Reuben is Jacob’s firstborn.
* In v. 9, Reuben now has four sons (contrast 42:37).
* In v. 10, Simeon’s son Saul is noted as having a Canaanite mother, which does not make Saul unique (see 38:2) but is presumably a slur (cf. 24:3, 37; 28:1, 6, 8; 36:2).[[461]](#footnote-461) Perhaps it provides an implicit explanation for the effective disappearance of Simeon’s clan later; the clan’s descent is traced entirely through Saul in 1 Chron 4:24-43. As is generally the case with references to Jacob’s sons, there is otherwise no indication that the ordering reflects aspects of the later position and interrelationships of the twelve Israelite clans.
* In v. 12, there is a note of the death of Er and Onan, and of Perez’s two sons, who must have been born later.
* In v. 15, Dinah as a sister appears.
* In v. 17, Beriah’s sister Serah appears (presumably because she was the author of Genesis),[[462]](#footnote-462) along with his two sons.
* In v. 19, Rachel is distinguished as Jacob’s wife as if Leah were not (cf. 44:27).
* In v. 20, Asenat, the mother of Joseph’s sons, the daughter of the priest from On, is mentioned.
* In v. 21, Benjamin has ten sons, which fits uneasily with his status as kid brother in Gen 44 and is another indication that the list does not simply comprise people who went down to Egypt. Most of these ten were perhaps born there; further, Num 26:36-40 makes five of them his grandsons.[[463]](#footnote-463)
* In v. 27 it is noted that Joseph’s two sons were born in Egypt.

Most of these nuances introduce women into the list (and Tamar is standing in the shadows in v. 12),[[464]](#footnote-464) which anticipates the presence of four women in Jesus’s genealogy. A further distinctive feature of this list over against 29:31—30:24 is that it is now in a position to include the names of Jacob’s grandsons. This process of development continues in the elaborated alternative versions of the list incorporated into the account of the Israelite clans after the exodus from Egypt in Num 26:5-50, and into the material in 1 Chron 1—8. There are many detailed differences in the names when they recur there and (e.g.) in the Septuagint,[[465]](#footnote-465) which presumably reflect the way the lists were preserved before making their way into the text of the Torah and of Chronicles and also the subsequent process of textual transmission; sometimes one may guess which version is older, sometimes not. The general parallels between the three lists suggest the significance of the list in its latter narrative contexts. The people that came out of Egypt is indeed the family that had gone down into Egypt (Num 26); so is the people that formed the First Temple community and the Second Temple community (1 Chron 1—8).

The pattern of the fulfillment of God’s promise so far has included a narrowing of the family: Isaac but not Ishmael, Jacob but not Esau. One might have expected this pattern to continue, and there is no theological or ethical reason why it shouldn’t do so—but it doesn’t.[[466]](#footnote-466) The sum total of the figures for Leah (33 including Dinah), Zilpah (16), Rachel (14), and Bilhah (7) comes to seventy, and that figure appears in v. 27 (cf. Exod 1:5; Deut 10:22), while v. 26 mentions sixty-six. Seventy suggests a complete company (cf. Exod 15:27; 24:1, 9; Num 11:16, 24, 25; Isa 23:15, 17; Jer 25:11-12), though not a vast company (see Deut 10:22). There are various ways of making the lists come to seventy or sixty-six: e.g., omitting Er and Onan who had died and Manasseh and Ephraim who were born in Egypt means seventy becomes sixty-six. LXX has seventy-five (cf. Acts 7:14) as a result of attributing nine sons to Joseph.[[467]](#footnote-467) If “the computation of those who went down to Egypt… is so confused that no interpreter has been able to unravel it,” what’s the point of including it? From it “we may learn that God exercises such anxious care for His saints that He does not want to omit counting even one person with the greatest faithfulness and diligence.”[[468]](#footnote-468)

**46:28-34**. The narrative backtracks to say more about the process whereby Jacob found his way to the family’s destination in Egypt, but with a focus on his reunion with Joseph. It was Judah who suggested selling Joseph into servitude in Egypt (37:26-27); now Jacob sends Judah to meet Joseph. “The wolf and the lamb shall feed together” (Isa 65:25) (cf. *GenR* 95:1); the commission suggests the possibility of reconciliation.[[469]](#footnote-469) Judah’s being the brother Jacob sends on also reflects the leadership role he has been fulfilling (43:3, 8; 44:14, 16, 18) and anticipates the leadership role that will focus on him in the future (49:8-12). Perhaps it presupposes that Reuben, Simeon, and Levi have disqualified themselves; if Judah had done so (Gen 38), he has redeemed himself. And for the audience, Judah and Joseph being the key figures anticipates the domination of their clans in Israel’s life. Gen 37—50 is not about Judah as much as about Joseph, but it is nearly so.[[470]](#footnote-470)

Joseph indicates his eagerness to see Jacob by harnessing his own chariot (vv. 29-30), like Abraham saddling his donkey in 22:3; albeit it is an eagerness he must have restrained for several years. Thus he “appears” (*rā’āh* niphal) before Jacob: apart from references to God appearing, the verb commonly suggests someone presenting himself (KJV) with due humility before God (e.g., Exod 23:15, 17; 34:20, 23, 24). Jacob’s tears of sorrow (37:35) give way to Joseph’s tears of joy. Whereas the crying in 45:1-2 marked from one perspective the climax of Joseph’s story, the crying that follows here marks another necessary aspect to the climax, as this reunion happens. Joseph cries and cries; Jacob’s response comes in words which are at least as telling.

The account of negotiations with Pharaoh (vv. 31-34) again overlaps with the account in 45:1-20, which might suggest that at a literary level the stories are allowed to overlap or might imply that Joseph will need to take up the earlier conversation he had with Pharaoh. One point about the negotiation may be that Joseph has no expectation that his brothers would work with Joseph in the administration and heighten the possibility of a foreign takeover of power in Egypt—not an unknown issue there. The offensiveness of shepherds may link with the ideas noted in connection with 43:32. Given that we don’t know otherwise of negative Egyptian attitudes to shepherding or a tension between farmers and shepherds, “shepherds” likely suggests Bedouin, the kind of people who belong out in Sinai not in Egypt proper, of whom Egyptians might be suspicious in the way that urban Westerners are suspicious of gypsies. Placing them on the Sinai side of Egypt would suit the Egyptians as well as suiting them.[[471]](#footnote-471) Shepherds would be a subset of “livestock men” (that phrase comes only here) and an alternative and possibly more acceptable self-description.

**47:1-9.** They describe themselves to Pharaoh as shepherds, which would perhaps reassure Pharaoh that they had no needs except for some grazing land.[[472]](#footnote-472) Being livestock-heads would be a more exalted position. The good land of Goshen would be a logical place for them to have that role.

The story reaches a further climax (v. 7) with the account of Jacob blessing Pharaoh; it would an appropriate response to Pharaoh’s welcoming and generous endowment (cf. Job 29:13; 31:20). The blessing would include thanksgiving (as when people bless God) but also a prayer for God’s blessing (cf. TPsJ). While in other contexts *bārak* can simply mean “greet” (e.g., 2 Kings 4:29), in this context and in the context of the importance of blessing in Genesis, the audience would be invited to pick up the overlap with the theme of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob being a means of blessing. The chosen family “include within the circle of blessing even *those who seem least in need of it*” and who are going to be problems in the future.[[473]](#footnote-473) The older man who is bearer of Yahweh’s promise blesses the younger man who is the foreign ruler (in Exod 12:32 Pharaoh asks for Moses’s blessing). “The lesser is blessed by the greater” (Heb 7:7).[[474]](#footnote-474)

For Pharaoh to ask about Jacob’s age (vv. 8-9) suggests the same framework of thinking. It is to ask how God’s blessing has worked out for Jacob. Jacob’s reply maintains the gloomy stance he has taken before (37:35; 42:38). While the final span of his life will be shorter than that of his father and grandfather (147 years over against 180 and 175), it doesn’t look short and neither does it look very bad compared with theirs, even though he had that long exile in Harran and the long years of grieving for Joseph. But he characterizes his life as a temporary residing, “a precarious landless existence (cf. Deut. 26:5)”[[475]](#footnote-475) There is indeed a sense in which one spends one’s whole life residing as an alien on earth (“This world is not my home, I’m just a-passing through”); one’s life is “borrowed time.”[[476]](#footnote-476) Yet there is little indication that the First Testament itself thinks this way[[477]](#footnote-477) and “residing as an alien” in one country or another is a common theme in Genesis—most recently in v. 4. Jacob has been a resident alien in Harran (32:4 [5]) as well as sharing the position of his father and grandfather in Canaan (35:27). Such residing was “the characteristic of the entire road of life which God had pointed out to the patriarchs.” It meant “renunciation of settlement and land ownership” and thus “a life which was oriented toward future fulfillment, namely, toward the promise of land which was often renewed to the patriarchs. Thus the patriarchs had lived in Canaan in a curiously ambiguous relationship to promise and fulfillment in the ‘land of their sojourning.’” But as Jacob apparently sees it, “the circumstances of this life ofsojourning became much more unfavorable in [Jacob’s] generation. In comparison with his father’s life his life has been briefer and more difficult.”[[478]](#footnote-478) Genesis is reminding the audience that the end of the story of Jacob’s life is drawing near.

**47:10-12**. Genesis summarizes the significance of that meeting between Jacob and Pharaoh as one of blessing, then moves on to the implementing of Pharaoh’s generosity. In v. 4 the brothers had spoken of “residing as aliens” in Egypt but then of “living” in Goshen, and in v. 6 it was that second verb that Pharaoh picked up. Now, surprisingly, Joseph gives them a “holding” (*’ăḥuzzāh*), which implies a tract of land that you possess on a permanent basis (cf. 17:8; 23:4; 36:43; 47:27; 48:4; 49:30; 50:13). Actually, the stay of Jacob’s descendants in Egypt is going to be longer than the term resident aliens would suggest. The name Ra’meses strictly belongs in a later context (see Exod 1:11); the city was named after Ra’meses II, a long-lived Pharaoh of the thirteenth century, which indeed lay in the northeast of Egypt and thus helps to make clear the location of Goshen in a later context.

**47:13-19.** Once again Genesis backtracks[[479]](#footnote-479) as it returns to the beginning of the famine years;[[480]](#footnote-480) the chapters in between have focused on the story of Jacob and his sons. These verses revert to the wider picture.

There is a broader food problem that needs solving (v. 13), beyond the fact noted in v. 12 that Joseph was in a position to ensure that even the children in his family had food. It’s not just a food problem. The famine has such a devastating effect that it threatens the life or morale or existence of both Egypt and Canaan.

But a result of the action Joseph took during the seven good years (v. 14) is that he can now take action to ensure the people’s survival. First, the people bring all their silver (that is, their cash) to buy from Joseph’s grain mountain that they presumably sold to him during the good years. Bringing the silver to Pharaoh’s s house would mean bringing it to the treasury which was in his palace,[[481]](#footnote-481) which might imply that Joseph is not stashing any away for himself and/or that Pharaoh benefits from Joseph’s course of action and/or that this course of action would facilitate development in Egypt.

Then the people have no alternative (vv. 15-17) to bartering their animals. If the passage as a whole covers the entire seven years of famine, then “that year” will likely imply not that purchasing with their silver simply took them through year one of the famine and that bartering their animals took them through year two; by the end of vv. 13-19, we are near the end of the famine.[[482]](#footnote-482) Presumably they did not physically deposit the animals with Joseph and thereby make work on the farm impossible while he would have nothing to do with them; rather the ownership passed to Pharaoh, as will happen with the land.

In due course (vv. 18-19) they have nothing left but their land and the corpses they will soon become. Indeed, in the absence of irrigation their land is as dead as they are. They need food for themselves and they need seed for their land for the time when the Nile floods once more, so they may eventually grow grain again. Their plea depends on an offer for Pharaoh to take over the ownership of their land and of themselves. The independence of a family depends on its possessing land; so parting with land means in a sense surrendering freedom.[[483]](#footnote-483) For the land, on the other hand, losing its inhabitants would mean losing the people who were supposed to “serve” it and look after it (2:15). It would become just a waste and be unable to reach the purpose for which God created it.

**47:20-26.** In effect Pharaoh thus becomes the lord of the estates that comprise the country as a whole, and the people become his laborers.

Moving the population from the country to the towns (vv. 21-22) is a surprising idea though it compares with a motif in the First Testament prophets who imply that many ordinary people were forced off their land and found themselves living in towns and commuting to their former farms in order to labor for the land’s new owners; this development would reinforce the fact that the land no longer belonged to them.[[484]](#footnote-484) The lucky exceptions were the priests, who received a regular allocation from the government and therefore were not vulnerable to the vagaries of the Nile like ordinary people.

Joseph’s declaration (vv. 23-26) presupposes that irrigation is now no longer a problem and they can farm successfully again. The farmers become sharecroppers who give the owner of the land a portion of the harvest as rent. And they can be positive about the arrangement.

## Joseph’s Economic Policy

Gen 47:13-26 has been described as “the showpiece in the arsenal of anti-Semitic polemic against the Old Testament.”[[485]](#footnote-485) Modern Western interpreters live in liberal democracies with liberal/ capitalist economic policies which in theory can work well for ordinary people but frequently do not do so, and the people who write commentaries and read them are usually people whom liberal democracy and liberal capitalism serve. Thus Joseph’s economic policy may meet with our disapproval.[[486]](#footnote-486)

The story assumes that there is such a thing as benevolent autocracy. Whereas governments in the West as elsewhere routinely work for their own benefit at least as much as for the benefit of those they govern, the story portrays an occasion when the central government worked for the benefit of people—indeed, for their salvation from starvation. Perhaps Pharaoh personally profited from Joseph’s policies, though Genesis does not refer to the fact. It focuses on the way ordinary people benefited from it. The governed do become state serfs, though modern translations mislead if they call them “slaves” (e.g., NRSV). The arrangement is not “total slavery.” [[487]](#footnote-487) It is some distance from the limited-term bond-service approved by Exodus and Deuteronomy, but a long way from the serfdom described in Exodus, where serfdom indeed becomes oppressive, and nothing like Roman or African-American slavery. The government is not described as having control over people’s lives or as limiting their freedom or as behaving oppressively. Pharaoh cannot do as he likes with them, as if they were his property.[[488]](#footnote-488) His control is economic. Whereas elsewhere “servant” is a useful translation of *‘ebed*, English does also have the useful word “serf” from the context of the feudal system, which denotes a laborer working on his lord's estate.

The story in 47:13-26 was told in contexts where Israel was ruled by monarchs or by empires and it makes for telling reading against the background of Samuel’s warning about monarchy in 1 Sam 8, which also talks in terms of the king making his people serfs and refers to a ten percent rate of taxation though also of other costs to people (the audience would also recall that they were supposed to pay a ten percent tithe). A twenty percent taxation rate was below average for the Middle East;[[489]](#footnote-489) 1 Maccabees 10:30 refers to a one-third tax on grain and one-half on fruit.[[490]](#footnote-490) The warning in 1 Sam 8 contrasts with the vision for benevolent autocracy laid out in a passage such as Ps 72, with which Joseph’s policy might compare. As a “tax etiology,”[[491]](#footnote-491) then, Gen 47:13-26 implicitly sets a standard for the operation of a taxation system. Genesis, Ps 72 and much of the rest of the First Testament presupposes government by monarchs and takes the important question then to be, how ought monarchy to operate? In Egypt people were “suffering” and Joseph “nurtured” them (vv. 13, 17).[[492]](#footnote-492) If Israelite monarchy operates as benevolently as this Egyptian monarchy with Joseph as its administrator, one may imagine that Israelites would be as appreciative as the Egyptians in this story. The same is true of millions of people governed by democratically elected leaders in Britain or the United States.

When this system Joseph devises becomes a permanency[[493]](#footnote-493) rather than just a way of coping with a once-off crisis, it favors the central administration. It would presumably help to pay for the army and for monumental buildings and no doubt for Pharaoh to be living better than his people—again, just as is the case in a liberal democracy. But Joseph’s system had the capacity to mitigate against the ups and downs of the Nile’s flooding in some years and not in others, and to provide a kind of equivalent of a social security system for the people—again, in a way not so different from that which is possible in a liberal democracy, though not always actual.

# Genesis 47.27 – 48.22—How Jacob Begins to Prepare for His Death

## Overview

The account of Jacob’s death begins with his appeal to Joseph to bury him in Canaan not in Egypt. When Jacob begins to ail, Joseph brings his sons to see Jacob, and Jacob blesses them, reversing their birth order by blessing Ephraim with his right hand and Manasseh with his left.

## Translation

47:27So Yiśra’el lived in the country of Miṣrayim in the Gošen region. They acquired a holding in it, they were fruitful, and they became very numerous. 28Ya‘aqob lived seventeen years in the country of Miṣrayim, and Ya‘aqob’s span, the years of his life, came to a hundred and forty-seven years. 29But the days drew near for Yiśra’el to die. He called his son Yosep and said to him, “Please, if I have found favor in your eyes, please put your hand under my thigh and act in commitment and steadfastness to me: please don’t bury me in Miṣrayim. 30I will lie down with my forebears,[[494]](#footnote-494) and you’re to carry me from Miṣrayim and bury me in their burial-place.” He said, “I myself will act in accordance with your word.” 31He said, “Swear to me,” and he swore to him, and Yiśra’el bowed low at the head of the bed.[[495]](#footnote-495)

48:1Subsequently,[[496]](#footnote-496) someone told Yosep, “Here, your father is ailing.”[[497]](#footnote-497) He got his two sons with him, Menaššeh and Eprayim, 2and someone told Ya‘aqob, “Here, your son Yosep has come to you.” Yiśra’el summoned his strength and sat on the bed. 3Ya‘aqob said to Yosep, “El Shadday himself[[498]](#footnote-498) appeared to me at Luz in the country of Kena‘an and blessed me, 4and said to me, ‘Here, I am going to make you fruitful and numerous and make you a congregation of peoples, and give this country to your offspring after you as an age-long holding.’

5And now, your two sons who were born to you in the country of Miṣrayim before my coming to you in Miṣrayim: they are mine. Eprayim and Menaššeh will be mine like Re’uben and Šim‘on. 6Given that your family that you will have fathered after them will be yours,[[499]](#footnote-499) by the name of their brothers they will be named, in their domain. 7I – during my coming from Paddan,[[500]](#footnote-500) Raḥel died on me,[[501]](#footnote-501) in the country of Kena‘an, on the way, when there was still a stretch of country before coming to Ephrat,[[502]](#footnote-502) and I buried her there on the way to Eprat” (i.e., Bet Lehem).

8So Yiśra’el looked at Yosep’s sons and said “Who are these?” 9Yosep said to his father, “They are my sons, whom God has given me here.” He said, “Please get them to me so I may bless them.” 10As Yiśra’el’s eyes were heavy because of age, he couldn’t see. So he brought them up to him, and he kissed them and hugged them. 11Yiśra’el said to Yosep, “To see your face! I didn’t pray for[[503]](#footnote-503) it. And here – God has let me see your offspring as well.” 12Then Yosep got them away from his knees and bowed low,[[504]](#footnote-504) with his face to the ground.

13Yosep got the two of them, Eprayim with his right to Yiśra’el’s left, and Menaššeh with his left to Yiśra’el’s right, and brought them up to him. 14But Yiśra’el put out his right hand and placed it on Eprayim’s head, though he was the younger, and his left hand on Menaššeh’s head, crossing his hands, when Menaššeh was the firstborn, 15and he blessed Yosep:[[505]](#footnote-505) “May the God before whom my fathers Abraham and Yiṣḥaq walked, the God who has been shepherding me from whenever until this day, 16the envoy who has been restoring me from everything bad, bless the boys. Through them may my name be named, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Yiṣḥaq. May they teem[[506]](#footnote-506) numerously in the middle of the earth.”

17Yosep saw that his father was putting his right hand on Eprayim’s head, and it was bad in his eyes. He grasped his father’s hand so as to move it from on Eprayim’s head onto Menaššeh’s head. 18Yosep said to his father, “Not like that, father, because this one is the firstborn. Place your right hand on his head.” 19But his father refused and said, “I know, son, I know. He will become a people as well, he will become big as well, but nevertheless his little brother—he will be bigger than him, and his offspring—it will become a full number of nations.” 20So that day he blessed them: “By you Yiśra’el will bless,[[507]](#footnote-507) saying ‘God make you like Eprayim and Menaššeh.’” But he put Eprayim before Menaššeh.

21Yiśra’el said to Yosep: “There, I’m going to die, but God will be with you [all] and will take you back to the country of your forebears. 22And I myself am giving[[508]](#footnote-508) to you[[509]](#footnote-509) a shoulder,[[510]](#footnote-510) one above your brothers, which I am getting[[511]](#footnote-511) from the hand of the Amorites with my sword and with my bow.”

## Interpretation

In Abraham’s story, Gen 23 announced that its last part would focus on his preparations for his passing which are then the focus of 23:1—25:10. In a whimsical way, Isaac’s story was even more dominated by such preparations; they begin in 27:1-2 though he passes only in 35:28-29. Then “the whole Joseph narrative presupposes that Jacob is near death (37:35; 42:39; 43:27-28; 44:22-29, 31; 45:9;, 13, 28; 46:30). In order to see Joseph once more before he dies, he came to Egypt (45:28). Now that he has seen him, he is ready to die (46:30). Inherent in the account, then, is the notion that Jacob’s journey to Egypt will be followed immediately by his death.” So what follows in the final chapters of Genesis is not an independent narrative but “an extended conclusion” to the entire story.[[512]](#footnote-512) But the last verses of Gen 47 mark the shift to a more explicit focus on Jacob’s preparations for his death and on the aftermath of his passing, which will occupy those closing chapters.

Whereas MT has a unit running from 46:28 to 47:31, and the medieval chapter division makes the same break as MT at 47:31, this understanding does not take account of the shift of focus which already comes in the closing verses of Gen 47. Indeed, MT also notes that 47:27 marks the end of the lection which began at 45:18. But 47:27 does not directly link back to what precedes in 47:13-26, which had not talked about Israel the man or Israel the people. Gen 47:27-28 is rather a resumptive summary leading into what follows. The “subsequently” of 48:1 is then not a marker of a new unit (as it is in 22:1, 20) but a marker of a transition within this new unit (as it is in 39:7; 40:1).

This unit has been seen as a particularly clear example of the interweaving of J, E, and P.[[513]](#footnote-513) AS a unit it provides answers to a series of possible questions about Manasseh and Ephraim. They are Jacob’s grandsons and Manasseh is the elder. But the Torah will later make clear that in effect they count as Jacob’s sons. How did that situation come about? Israelites listening to this story would know that the clans that Manasseh and Ephraim ended up as two of the most significant clans—Manasseh had the biggest territory and Ephraim occupied the most central position. Ephraim was thus politically more important than Manasseh, and it gave the northern kingdom its distinctive name. Shechem was in Ephraim, Samaria was there, Tirzah was there. How did all that come about? The story will provide answers to such questions.

**47:27-28.** Genesis brings us back to the main story and effects a transition to a focus on Jacob’s passing.

The opening sentence (v. 27) thus compares and contrasts with the opening sentence of the story of Jacob’s line as a whole (37:1). As that sentence functioned resumptively after the account of Esau’s lines of descent, this sentence does so after the account of Joseph’s rescue of the Egyptian people. But this sentence contrasts with that earlier one in noting that Jacob is “living” in a settled fashion in Egypt, and specifically Goshen, as opposed to “living” in the country of his father’s residence, and specifically Canaan. In a further contrast, the verse speaks of Israel rather than Jacob, picking up the use of that name in 46:28-30 which will recur in v. 29. But then with a jolt the verse goes on to speak of Israel as “they,” suggesting a “merging of Israel the individual and Israel the people.”[[514]](#footnote-514) And Israel’s settling is a serious settling. It includes having holdings in Egypt; here Genesis picks up from v. 11.[[515]](#footnote-515) The Israelites were fruitful and they became numerous, in fulfillment of the commission or promise in 35:11 and the blessing in 28:3—and of God’s original commission or promise to the first human beings and to the people who survived the great deluge (1:22, 28; 8:17; 9:1, 7). It is the first time that being fruitful and becoming numerous has been a fact rather than a promise.

Genesis then reverts (v. 28) to speaking of Jacob, as it jumps through the next seventeen years, which recall the seventeen years of 37:2. Further, Abraham had lived to 175, which is 5x5x7, and Isaac had lived to 180, which is 6x6x5; Jacob’s 147 will be 7x7x3.[[516]](#footnote-516) This “rhetorical device” gives expression to these lives being “not a concatenation of haphazard incidents.”[[517]](#footnote-517) The arrangement compares with the three times fourteen sequence of the genealogy in Matt 1:1-17.

**47:29-31.** “After all his talk of dying, Jacob is finally near death.”[[518]](#footnote-518) Genesis goes on to announce its focus on his passing. Reference to the time drawing near could mean it had actually arrived (cf. 27:41), but in Gen 47—49 there is a lot still to happen—or a lot to be said. First, Jacob wants to make sure of the fulfillment of God’s promise in 46:4 that he will return to Canaan. The desire to be buried in one’s own country among one’s own people is common, but Canaan’s being *the* promised land gives extra background to this desire. Joseph is still evidently a favorite if not the favorite among Jacob’s sons; he is also the son in a position to see that his father’s wishes are met. Jacob’s concern, even anxiety, about his burial is underlined by his talk of finding favor: it is the phrase he used in the context of his relationship with Esau (32:5 [6]; 33:8, 10, 15)—and the phrase that Shechem and the starving Egyptians used (34:11; 47:25). It is a term that the lesser party uses in relation to the senior party. He repeats the request Abraham used to his servant in a different connection in 24:2, but also in the part of Abraham’s story where he is doing what needs to be done before he dies, and where he is also taking action in relation to his son and the future of the family. Jacob further underlines the importance of the matter to Jacob by using the hendiadys “commitment and steadfastness,” which also recurred in that story in 24:27, 49 and on Jacob’s lips in the Esau story in 32:10 [11]. It would be natural to bury Jacob in Egypt where he dies, which will be the destiny of his many descendants over the coming years. Jacob doesn’t want it to be his destiny.

The terms in which Jacob then speaks of his death (v. 30) are a little paradoxical. Lying down with one’s ancestors is a euphemism for dying, and it precedes burial (cf. e.g., 1 Kings 2:10).[[519]](#footnote-519) Jacob wants it to be a literal reality.

It is not enough (v. 31) for Joseph simply to reassure Jacob. Jacob wants a formal sworn promise. When he gets it, he bows low. Presumably he does so on his bed because of being of advanced age and near death, like David in 1 Kings 1:47. Bowing low can be a gesture of respect to God (e.g., Gen 22:5), as it was in David’s case; Vg and TgNeoph take it as an expression of worship here. But it can also be a gesture of respect to a human being (e.g., 23:7). Joseph’s brothers had already bowed low in 42:6; 43:26, 28, fulfilling the dream about them in 37:7. Now it is Jacob’s turn, fulfilling the dream about him in 37:10.

**48:1-7.** The theme of the story that follows is Jacob’s changing the status of Joseph’s two sons so that they become his own. It suggests background to some later realities in Israel.

The time reference (vv. 1-2) is vague, but when a man of Jacob’s age gets weak and sickly, it opens up the possibility that this illness might be the last one: cf. v. 21. Is Joseph thinking that he should take his sons to see Joseph before he dies, and is Jacob thinking the same way as he summons up his strength to sit up in bed? For the audience, the story that follows helps to explain the puzzling facts that Ephraim and Manasseh were two of the twelve clans even their ancestors were not among Jacob’s twelve sons, and that Joseph did not have a clan bearing his name.

Jacob’s testimony (vv. 3-4) is a “pastiche”[[520]](#footnote-520) of phrases from several accounts of God’s dealings with him. It was God who had spoken of his “appearing” to Jacob. It was El Shadday whose blessing on Jacob Isaac had declared in 28:3-4, a blessing that would issue In his being fruitful and numerous and becoming a congregation of peoples and being given the country where he was residing as an alien. It was then as Yahweh and as the God of Abraham and Isaac that God had spoken to Jacob at Luz in 28:13 and had affirmed these promises. Behind those passages, the declaration that the country would be an age-long holding goes back to God’s promise to Abraham in 17:8. So Jacob speaks as heir to Abraham’s promises, as beneficiary of Isaac’s blessing, and as himself recipient of God’s revelation and God’s promises.

He intends to treat Joseph’s two sons as his own (v. 5), with parallel status to his own eldest sons. The declaration links with the one in vv. 3-4: God had said that Jacob was to have numerous descendants, and Ephraim and Manasseh will be means of that promise coming true. But as his grandchildren they would have that role anyway. Jacob’s action has different implications. It compares with Middle Eastern conventions for making someone an heir.[[521]](#footnote-521) As Reuben and Simeon will be two clans called by their names, Ephraim and Manasseh will be two clans called by their names.[[522]](#footnote-522) It will be as if they are Jacob’s sons—which is in effect what he is making them. Indeed, perhaps Jacob is implying that Ephraim and Manasseh will be more than the equal of Reuben and Simeon—as indeed the clans of Ephraim and Manasseh were. The first reason for this action that Jacob hints is their having been born in Egypt before his arrival, which looks like a euphemistic way of alluding to their mother being Egyptian, which means there is some ambiguity about whether they are really Israelites. In this connection one might speak of their “legitimation”[[523]](#footnote-523) rather than their adoption.

Any more offspring Joseph has will continue to count as his (v. 6). We do not hear of any, so in effect Jacob’s words refer to descendants Joseph will have via his two sons. As the descendants of people such as Reuben and Simeon will share in the nation’s land through their father, those other offspring of Joseph will share in the nation’s land through their father, either Ephraim or Manasseh, according to who was their ancestor. It means that the arrangement whereby some of Jacob’s grandsons can become heads of clans happens just this once. Later, a big clan like Manasseh will have powerful subgroups such as Makir and Gilead (see 50:23; and e.g., Judg 5); they might fancy the idea of becoming clans in their own right. It’s not going to happen. For the audience there is thus another question that Jacob’s action answers. The prevalence of the name Israel in this chapter fits with this focus on possible implications for the later clans.

A third possible implication in Jacob’s action (v. 7) is apparently something to do with Rachel’s passing. If only she had had chance to bear Jacob other children as well as Joseph (the father of these two) and Benjamin (whose birth was the occasion of her passing). “Jacob’s whole life is filled with love for Rachel, a love that caused him so much distress and pain. First, he had to serve many years for her, then she bore him no sons for a long period, and she died giving birth to the second child. Then he transferred his love for her to her sons.”[[524]](#footnote-524) Now Jacob is making a further gesture to Joseph’s two children and thereby increases (posthumously) Rachel’s offspring to four.[[525]](#footnote-525) Will the flourishing of these twoclans to descend from him and Rachel take the edge off his imminent burial without her at his side?[[526]](#footnote-526) "My poor beloved Jacob! So many years had passed since my death—but he still couldn’t let go of his grief. Here at the end of his life he tried to compensate by adopting our grandsons, Ephraim and Manasseh, as his own, and so gave our firstborn, Joseph, a double portion of the inheritance.” And at the end of his life “he suddenly realized that he would lie forever separate from me.… So just as my sister Leah was his first bride instead of me, she remained his eternal companion in death.” [[527]](#footnote-527)

**48:8-20.** Yet again, Genesis goes back on its account of an event to tell us more. The theme is now the elevation of Ephraim over Manasseh.

Jacob’s question (v. 8) might indicate that the event recorded here happened on his original arrival in Egypt. Or it might indicate that Jacob cannot see well: cf. v. 10. Or it might parallel questions traditionally asked in a marriage service such as “who gives this woman to be married to this man” or “do you take this man as your lawful wedded husband.”[[528]](#footnote-528) The purpose of the question is then not to establish otherwise unknown facts but to articulate known facts as part of a legal or quasi-legal process. The story does not simply concern a touching meeting between grandfather and grandchildren.

Jacob wishes to bless Joseph’s sons (vv. 9-11). The theme of blessing, of key importance in Genesis, will be of key importance in these closing chapters: verb and noun come fifteen times in Gen 48—50. Whereas in English “blessing” can suggest especially an inner sense of well-being, expressed in an awareness of God’s presence and favor, Hebrew *bᵉrākāh* suggests especially an outward experience of that favor and of well-being expressed in experiences such as having a flourishing family and having plenty to eat (the First Testament does value that inner sense of well-being and of God’s presence and favor—it just doesn’t link it with *bᵉrākāh*). Such gifts need to come from God, but in some respects God delegates to humanity the capacity to convey them. The head of a family is especially significant in having control of them and deciding who receives them. When Jacob talks about blessing his grandsons, he refers to that power, and his words of blessing will be the means of conveying them, as (say) the words of a dean are the means of admitting someone to a program or of graduating them, or as the words of the head of a Western family can still transfer the ownership of the family’s possessions to different offspring on the person’s death. It is as he nears death that Jacob will especially do some blessing, as his father did.

Joseph’s bowing (v. 12) nicely reverses the bowing of 47:31. It is perhaps an expression of his submission to his father as he seeks his blessing for the two young men—or boys, if Genesis implies that they are sitting on Jacob’s knee, but they may be kneeling in front of him.

Once again Genesis goes back to give us more detail (v. 13).[[529]](#footnote-529) Cultures will commonly have conventions about questions such as how blessing should work: for instance, that the eldest son has more responsibility and receives a more substantial share of the family’s estate. Joseph assumes that convention. Because the right hand is the more effective hand for most people, it is often the hand that counts in legal procedures (“raise your right hand and repeat after me”). So because Manasseh is Joseph’s elder son (41:51-52), Joseph puts him in a position to get the blessing that comes from Jacob’s right hand, which one might expect to be more powerful or effective.

But Jacob insists (v. 14) on frustrating Joseph’s expectations by crossing his hands so that his right hand rests on Ephraim. People with the power of blessing may indeed not be bound by the cultural conventions. While in this case, Manasseh and Ephraim need not have the same rights within the family because of their hybrid nationality, and as Jacob’s grandchildren they do not have the same rights as his children, Jacob has already bypassed these considerations. He now intends to bypass the principle that the eldest son has a privileged position—as he and Rebekah had circumvented it for him, and his grandfather had bypassed it for his father. He had already hinted as much in v. 5 when he spoke of “Ephraim and Manasseh.”

A blessing is a prayer (v. 15a) and an act of faith: in Heb 11:21 this blessing is Jacob’s “outstanding act of faith.”[[530]](#footnote-530) It is God who blesses, even though God can delegate to human beings the power to bestow his blessing, and bind himself to the way they do so, and fathers thus have the power to bless.[[531]](#footnote-531) And consciously or unconsciously they may do so in a way that embodies the way God’s blessing may be arbitrary in the sense that it may not work by rules. The divine landowner feels free to pay people the same amount no matter how long they labored (Matt 20:1-16).[[532]](#footnote-532) On this occasion, in blessing Joseph’s sons Jacob is blessing Joseph. Blessing the young men counts as blessing their father. Of course it does! Further, when he gives the boys two shares within the family inheritance, it would not be a big jump to see him as making Joseph his firstborn (cf. Deut 21:17). It is the jump that 1 Chron 5:1-3 may presuppose.[[533]](#footnote-533) He also noted in v. 5 that Reuben and Simeon are his two oldest sons, but he is here implicitly treating his favorite Joseph as his eldest son, explicitly treating Ephraim as Joseph’s eldest son, and implicitly explaining the later dominance of the Joseph clans and of Ephraim; the distinction between the individual and the community indeed becomes hazy here, and the story’s importance links with the importance of that development. It would boggle Judahite minds in the monarchic period or in the Persian period.

The form of Jacob’s blessing (v. 15b) recalls that of a hymn of praise such as Ps 103.[[534]](#footnote-534) The blessing is “completely focused on God.”[[535]](#footnote-535) Jacob has three descriptions of God. He is the God before whom Abraham and Isaac walked (see 17:1; 24:40). Jacob thus makes a link with the past and with his past family and with the long saga of God’s promise and covenant. He is the God who has been shepherding Jacob himself. In contrast to that first description, this one is original and unique to Jacob in the Torah. It will recur in 49:24, and famously reappear in Ps 23:1; also 80:1 [2]. Jacob of course knows all about shepherding. It is a remarkable description because a shepherd normally looks after a flock, not a single sheep.[[536]](#footnote-536)

Third (v. 16a), Jacob in effect identifies God with the envoy who represents God, and thus draws attention to God’s having been present with him spatially and visibly. The envoy who rescues from trouble compares with the earlier envoy of 21:17-19. But with further originality Jacob describes him as the one who has “restored” him (*gā’al*) from all the bad experiences he has had. God has acted in relation to Jacob like the member of a person’s extended family who has the resources to get someone out of trouble and uses those resources to this end. The verb comes only here in Genesis, but Jacob’s use of it nicely anticipate Exod 6:6; 15:13. His words would ring bells with Judahites in exile to whom Yahweh spoke especially as “restorer” (e.g. Isa 44:6, 22, 23, 24) even while also being the one has made bad things happen (Isa 45:7). The blessing of a God capable of being described in these three ways in vv. 15b-16a is a powerful reality whether you are the younger son or the older. It reminds Israel itself (e.g., in the context of the exile) that its hope lies not in the promise of the land or in being the people of promise but in the God of the ancestors.[[537]](#footnote-537) And as this blessing is effective, and as the two clans are known as belonging among the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, so will the names of these ancestors be known and honored.

As a footnote (v. 16b), Jacob articulates the usual promise about becoming numerous to make sure that it explicitly applies to them, but he expresses it again in an innovative way by using a verb for multiply (*dāgāh*) which comes only here and suggests they will teem like the fish in Lake Kinneret, on either side of which Manasseh strides.

Yet once more Genesis backtracks (vv. 17-20) to tell us further about the process that has just been summarized. As Isaac’s father could bless him as the younger son even though Jacob was acting deceptively, so Jacob could bless Joseph’s younger son even though Joseph wants to avoid it. Once again, the fact that one is blessed or chosen does not mean that the other is cursed or rejected.[[538]](#footnote-538) The difference between the two blessings is not great; more noteworthy is the magnitude of the blessing both receive. Thus the Israelites will pronounce a blessing by each of them: “you” at the beginning of v. 20 is singular, as is the later “you.” Both Ephraim and Manasseh will embody the promise about Abraham and thus about all Jacob’s descendants. They are just as much descendants of Jacob as (say) Reuben and Simeon.

**48:21-22.** Jacob’s closing words to Joseph first take up God’s promise to be “with you,” made earlier to Jacob himself, but here reformulated so that for the first time it takes the plural form and thus applies to the entire family. “Though Iacob died, yet the promise of God died not.”[[539]](#footnote-539)

Jacob then (v. 22) incorporates a promise that is more distinctly a blessing of Joseph: the “you” is now singular. Shoulder is *šᵉkem* and Shechem is in the heart of the area that will belong to the Joseph clans; it is also the place where Joseph will be buried (Josh 24:32). What does Jacob mean by taking the town with his sword and his bow? He hardly refers to the event related in Gen 34; and the First Testament records no subsequent taking of Shechem by Jacob or by Israel itself. Indeed, Yahweh proclaims at Shechem that the Israelites did not take Canaan by the use of sword and bow (Josh 24:12). Actually they did do so; the point about Yahweh’s denial is that it was not merely by their sword and bow. They would not have succeeded without Yahweh’s involvement.[[540]](#footnote-540) Jacob’s point here is the promise that he (through his descendants) will take the mountain ridge at whose center Shechem sits, and Joseph (through his descendants) will possess it. The story provides another bit of background to and explanation of later realities in Israel. In making this promise Jacob continues to favor Joseph over all his brothers, even on his deathbed.”[[541]](#footnote-541) And his promise finds fulfillment.

# Genesis 49.1-27— How Jacob Addresses Each of His Sons before Dying

## Overview

The peak of Gen 36—50 and perhaps of the whole book of Genesis comes in a picture of the “embryonic nation” incorporating the Judah and Joseph clans in their preeminent positions in the north and south.[[542]](#footnote-542) Jacob reveals to each of his sons aspects of their future destiny as it will unfold in the lives of the clans that will descend from them.

## Translation

1Ya‘aqob called his sons; he said, “Gather together so I may tell you[[543]](#footnote-543) what is to befall[[544]](#footnote-544) you in days to come.[[545]](#footnote-545)

2Assemble and listen, sons of Ya‘aqob,

listen to Yiśra’el your father.

3Re’uben: you, my firstborn,

my strength and the initiation of my vigor,

Excellence in high position

and excellence in strength.

4Turbulence[[546]](#footnote-546) like water: you are not to excel,

because you climbed your father’s big bed.[[547]](#footnote-547)

Thereby[[548]](#footnote-548) you polluted—[[549]](#footnote-549)

one who climbed my couch![[550]](#footnote-550)

5Šim‘on and Lewi, brothers,

their blades[[551]](#footnote-551) tools of violence:

6In their council my person is not to come,

in their congregation my soul[[552]](#footnote-552) is not to join.

Because in their anger they killed someone,

in their pleasure they hamstrung[[553]](#footnote-553) an ox.[[554]](#footnote-554)

7Cursed their anger because it was strong,

their outburst because it was tough!

I will divide them in Ya‘aqob,

disperse them in Yiśra’el.

8Yehudah: you,[[555]](#footnote-555)

your brothers will confess you.

Your hand on your enemies’ neck,

your father’s sons will bow down to you.

9A lion cub, Yehudah

(from prey, son, you’ve gone up):

He has bent down, lain, like a lion,

like a cougar[[556]](#footnote-556) – who would rouse him?

10The staff will not leave from Yehudah,

the scepter from between his feet,

Until[[557]](#footnote-557) there comes tribute to him[[558]](#footnote-558)

and the obedience of the peoples to him.

11Tying[[559]](#footnote-559) his donkey to a vine,

the offspring of his she-donkey to a choice vine,

He has washed his clothing in wine,

his garment in grape-blood:

12Darker of eyes than wine,

whiter of teeth than milk.[[560]](#footnote-560)

13Zebulun: towards the shore of the seas he will dwell,

towards the shore for ships, him,

his flank at Sidon.

14Yiśśakar: a donkey, sturdy,

lying among the sheepfolds.[[561]](#footnote-561)

15He has seen a resting place, how good it was,

and the region, how beautiful.

But he has bent his shoulder to the burden,

become a conscript servant.

16Dan: his people will govern[[562]](#footnote-562)

as one of the clans of Yiśra’el.

17May Dan be[[563]](#footnote-563) a snake by the road,

a viper by the path,

One that bites the horse’s heels

so its rider falls backwards:

18for your deliverance I have waited,[[564]](#footnote-564) Yahweh.

19Gad: an attacker[[565]](#footnote-565) will attack him,

but he himself will attack their heel.

20From[[566]](#footnote-566) Ašer: rich his bread,

and he, one who will give a king’s delicacies.

21Naptali: a hind[[567]](#footnote-567) set free;

it gives[[568]](#footnote-568) fawns[[569]](#footnote-569) of the fold.[[570]](#footnote-570)

22A son,[[571]](#footnote-571) a wild donkey,[[572]](#footnote-572) Yosep,

a son, a wild donkey:

Its daughters by a spring,[[573]](#footnote-573)

it has stridden[[574]](#footnote-574) by a terrace.[[575]](#footnote-575)

23People made things bitter for him[[576]](#footnote-576) and fought,[[577]](#footnote-577)

archers were hostile towards him.

24But his bow stayed firm,

his arms and hands[[578]](#footnote-578) were agile,

From the hands of the Strong Man of Ya‘aqob,

from there, the Shepherd, the Stone of Yiśra’el,

25From God, your Father,[[579]](#footnote-579) so he will help you,

and Šadday,[[580]](#footnote-580) so he will bless you,

With blessings of the heavens above,

blessings of the deep lying below.

Blessings of the breasts and the womb,

26your father’s blessings—

They have been stronger than the blessings of those who conceived me,[[581]](#footnote-581)

beyond the desirable things on the age-long hills.

They will come on Yosep’s head,

on the brow of one set apart[[582]](#footnote-582) among his brothers.

27Binyamin: a wolf who will maul,

in the morning will eat prey,[[583]](#footnote-583)

and towards the evening will divide spoil.”

## Interpretation

The term “testament” describes a number of Jewish works from late Second Temple times which characteristically present themselves as addresses by an important scriptural figure when he is about to die. While they are not testaments in the sense that they convey bequests, they may testify to events in the life of the figure and/or challenge the hearers to live holy lives and /or make promises and issue warnings about the future. A testament is not exactly a prophecy or a prediction; it is more like a blessing, the term that comes in v. 28 (cf. Deut 33). It announces good news, but also possibly bad news, and it incorporates compliments and critique. Given the variety in the form and nature of testaments, their single distinctive defining feature is their setting on the lips of someone who is about to die and who speaks about the future as it will affect the rhetorical and actual addressees. Both their variety and the nature of this defining feature make “the Testament of Jacob” a convenient description of Gen 49:1-27.[[584]](#footnote-584) Either end of this testament, v. 1 announces it as a prophecy, v. 2 pictures it as fatherly instruction, while v. 28 describes it retrospectively as a blessing. It informs, warns, promises, wishes, and (by virtue of the power of the words of his one who speaks) ensures and effects its own fulfillment.

The sayings about the individual people and about the clans that trace their ancestry back to these individuals all take poetic form, but beyond that feature they vary. They differ in how far they focus on the individual and how far they focus on the clan. They differ in length from two or three cola to eighteen or nineteen. The length of the Judah and Joseph sections reflects the prominence of these individuals in Gen 37—50 and the prominence of these clans in Israel, but otherwise there is no evident explanation for the variation. The variety among the sayings may suggest that they are of separate origin, perhaps as sayings formulated within each clan,[[585]](#footnote-585) but we do not have evidence of the development of clan sayings in this way, and it seems just as plausible that the Testament should have been composed in its varied form as that it should have been compiled and allowed to stand in its varied form.[[586]](#footnote-586)

The testament is “the first sustained piece of Hebrew poetry in the Torah” [[587]](#footnote-587) and its poetry follows common Hebrew poetic form. Most lines comprise two parts in which the second complements the first, usually by restating it or completing it. In many lines the two parts comprise three words, though in some lines one part may comprise two or four words. I refer to a single part of a line as a colon; thus one line is usually a bicolon, while occasional lines are tricola—they comprise three parts. Poetry in the Hebrew Scriptures switches easily between the second person and the third person; the switch happens in the Judah and Joseph declarations (the Reuben declaration is second-person, the others are entirely third person). Poetry uses the second person because rhetorically it directly addresses the people named. It uses the third person since it speaks about these people to others who are listening because the declaration has significance for them, and/or since it puts the addressees into the position of people overhearing statements that are actually about them. For related reasons Jacob himself can switch between speaking as “I” and referring to himself as “he.” Whereas in general the Hebrew of the Joseph story may seem “unsophisticated,”[[588]](#footnote-588) the Hebrew of Gen 49 can be allusive and elliptical, and sophisticated in its use of paronomasia; it parallels the poetry of a prophet such as Hosea. It makes use of repetition or anaphora, a feature of Hebrew poetry elsewhere (cf. vv. 3, 4, 13, 22, 25, 26). But it also follows the form of a list as lists commonly appear in the Hebrew Bible, beginning with a name and continuing asyndetically.

In more detail, the poetry works as follows.

* V. 2: Jacob’s bidding comprises two parallel cola. Rhythmically, MT punctuates them as 4-3 (one could repunctuate them as 3-3 by hyphenating “sons of Jacob” (cf. e.g., 36:20, 22). In substance they work aba’c. Thus both cola contain a bidding, which is doubled in the first colon, heightening the effect; the second verb then recurs in the second colon in the first occurrence of anaphora in the poem. Only the first colon contains a vocative (which thus also applies to the second) and only the second contains an (indirect) object (which thus also applies to the first). Tightening the two cola further, however, the indirect object (Israel your father) vocative refers to the person named in the vocative (sons of Jacob). In other words, formally there is an aba’b’ parallelism in the line, between the two verbal expressions and the two noun expressions.
* Vv. 3-4: the declaration begins with two parallel cola (3-3); the second works out the implications of the first. Then v. 3b comprises two briefer cola (2-2) whose parallelism is more precise; they include the poem’s second example of anaphora as it repeats the word for excellence. The line prepares the way for v. 4a (3-4). MT here punctuates the line as 3-4 and one might imagine that here the *kî* does not count metrically; sometimes in a poetic line *kî* is hyphenated into the next word (e.g., Deut 32:22, 32, 36, 40). The four lines would then be a neat 3-3, 2-2, 3-3, 2-2. V. 4a follows on v. 3b in several contrasting ways. “Turbulence like water” continues the sequence of asyndetic noun phrases which leave the audience to provide the syntactical links in order to make sense of the lines, though its noun phrase has a different significance; it constitutes a threat, not a description like the phrases in v. 3b. Then the verb “excel” takes up the root of that repeated noun. The internal relationship between the two cola within v. 4a involves not parallelism but clarification; the second explains the reasoning behind the first and thus explains the need for a change in the talk of “excelling.” Finally both cola in v. 4b expand on that explanation and thus have a tighter relationship with it than with each other. The first colon extends that explanation, answering the question “What was so wrong about climbing into his father’s bed?” The second colon parallels and restates that earlier explanation, with a further repeat of forms of the verb *‘ālāh*.
* Vv. 5-7: the five lines exploit several potentials of parallelism. In v. 5, the first colon raises a question (“What do you mean by saying that they were brothers, in some special sense?), which the second colon answers. Verse 6a is an especially neat 3-3 line in which the second expresses the point in a less everyday way. Something similar applies to v. 6b (4-2) except that the opening “because” is resumed by a *w* at the beginning of the second colon and again to v. 7a (4-3), which also has a word in one colon (“cursed”) carrying over into the other. Further, vv. 6-7a work aba’b’: two cola in v. 6a referring to the brothers’ planning, one in v. 6bα to their anger, then one more in v. 6bβ referring to their planning, and two more in v. 7a to their anger. The punchy 2-2 final line (v. 7b) again has the second colon expressing the point in a less everyday way.
* Vv. 8-12: in both lines of the opening declaration (2-2, 3-4), the second colon completes and clarifies the first, and the two lines are also themselves parallel. In the opening further brisk no-nonsense 2-2 bicolon, the point about the initial “you” is that “you” will be the person with his hand on his enemies’ neck; the second line begins by answering the question raised by the first (“why will they confess him?”) then goes on to restate “your brothers will confess you” in the words “your father’s sons will bow down to you.”

V. 9 (3-3, 3-3) starts again, though it has some partial parallels with v. 8. In its opening colon it makes another reference to Judah but it starts with the poem’s first animal metaphor. The opening colon thus raises a question (“How is Judah like a lion cub?), which the rest of the verse answers. Momentarily, the second colon begins that answer with a switch back to second person, but the third person form of v. 9b probably confirms that the opening colon was third person rather than vocative address to Judah, like v. 8. V. 9b works roughly abb’a’. In beginning with a double verb that underlines its point, it follows the precedent of v. 2. At the center the two words for a lion parallel each other. The closing question parallels in substance the doubled verb.

Vv. 10-12 comprise five straightforwardly parallel lines, 3-3, 3-3, 3-3, 3-2, 3-2 (again one could easily punctuate the two odd lines so they were 3-3). Hypothesizing that v. 10b composes two parallel cola like the others in this sequence helps to make sense of a line that has been a puzzle, as “obedience to him” provides a plausible parallel and clarifier for the rare expression “tribute to him,” though the word for “obedience” is almost as rare. Three further internally parallel lines describe Judah’s flourishing in other ways. The two lines comprising v. 11 again each have a verb that governs the second colon as well as the first, with the second otherwise restating the first in slightly less straightforward, more vivid fashion. The Judah sequence closes with an enjambment in two parallel cola which take up the wine image but then move in another direction.

* V. 13: Zebulun is the subject of Jacob’s first tricolon (4-3-2), with the three cola parallel in their geographical references governed by Zebulun’s own verb (*zābal*) in between the first two which are more tightly tied by the anaphora “towards the shore.”
* Vv. 14-15: the three lines on Issachar work 3-3, 4-3, 3-2. In the first line, the double description of the donkey raises the question what lies behind it. V. 15 provides a poignant answer. One verb governs the two parallel cola in v. 15a lines developing the idyllic implications of “lying among the sheepfolds.” But then two more parallel cola reveal the downside to being a sturdy donkey. Its strength gets harnessed.
* Vv. 16-18: the three lines on Dan (3-3, 3-2, 3-3-3) overlap in their working with the three lines on Issachar, though they start from literal statement and segue into imagery, whereas vv. 14-15 had started with an animal image and worked towards the literal. V. 16 starts with another paronomasia; then the second colon simply completes the line. Yet poetically it leaves the audience asking “So what does that mean, what’s the point of that comment?” though an Israelite audience might be able to guess that it relates to Dan not looking as if it can live up to its name. V. 17a expresses in parallel cola a wish that it may be able to find its way into a position where it can do so. V. 17b then develops the point; the second colon completes the first. The unexpected third colon (v. 18) expresses in a prayer the wish that dominates the three verses.
* V. 19: the characterization of Gad depends on paronomasia:

*gād gᵉdûd yᵉgûdennû*

*wᵉhû’ yāgud ‘āqēb*

In Jacob’s testament it is the only example of antithetic parallelism; the second colon in the 3-3 line contrasts with the first.

* V. 20: in the parallelism of the 3-3 line, the verbal clause in the second colon complements the noun clause in the first, and “a king’s delicacies” vividly re-expresses the nature of “rich food.”
* V. 21: in the animal imagery relating to Naphtali (3-2) the second colon spells out the implications of the first.
* V. 22-26: the first line in v. 22 (3-2) repeats itself in an anaphora paralleling the Reuben verses, which gives the audience chance to absorb the intriguing description of Joseph as a son who is *pōrāt*. The third and fourth cola (v. 22b; 2-2) make the audience work harder. The parallel clauses begin and end with similar prepositional phrases, but the audience has to wait until the second colon for the verb, which is indeed the entire verse’s main verb. In vv. 23-26 (2-3, 3-3, 3-4, 3-3, 3-4, 3-2, 3-3, 3-3) the prosody is more straightforward. In each line the cola are parallel and each time the second colon restates the first. In v. 23 the second clarifies the first, answering the possible question “How did they fight?” (they were archers). In v. 24a, the second complements the first. The further line of description (v. 25a) comprises two further “from” phrases, but the parallelism between vv. 24b and 25a is complemented by a change, as each colon continues with a verbal clause. Jacob’s sentence continues to run on in another rather unusual and unrestrained enjambment. I take the six cola (vv. 25b-26a) as three bicola rather than the two tricola implied by MT, with the enjambment continuing into the first colon of v. 26. In the parallelism of the first pair of blessings, above and below complement each other. The middle cola refer to blessings that Jacob especially knows about in his family as well as in his work as a shepherd; thus “your father’s blessings” restates “blessings of the breasts and the womb.”
* V. 27: The testament closes with a tricolon full of drama and energy, its imagery a little reminiscent of the lion imagery applied to Benjamin’s brother. In the parallelism, the subject in the first colon applies also to the second and third cola. There’s no “who” in the Hebrew (that is, it’s an unmarked relative clause), so the three verbs are parallel with the second and third spelling out the implications of the first (which is the verb used four times of the assumed fate of Benjamin’s brother). The second and third are word-for-word parallel, with “in the morning” and “towards the evening” balancing each other as a merism (they imply, “all day”). “Prey” and “spoil” balance each other, with the more common word coming second and clarifying the uncommon first word.

Gen 49 “is somewhat obscure and difficult, especially because it has many teachers and interpreters with completely divergent views. Therefore we must make the crooked and curved road we are following smooth and straight. But we shall do what we can.”[[589]](#footnote-589) The testament communicates in an allusive and enigmatic fashion and uses a number of unusual or unique Hebrew words. Many suggestions have been made for the clarifications of its distinctive words by comparing them with Ugaritic expressions,[[590]](#footnote-590) but it is hard to evaluate these suggestions and I have focused on the way the poem would communicate to people who were used to ordinary classical Hebrew. The poem’s language is not characterized by manifest archaisms or by clearly late Hebrew expressions,[[591]](#footnote-591) so it does not point to a date any different from that of the rest of Genesis—whatever that date might be. It has been dated in the pre-monarchic period, the Davidic/Solomonic era, the period of the two monarchies, the Babylonian period, and the Persian period.[[592]](#footnote-592) The poem itself invites the audience to keep in mind two chronological contexts, the time of Jacob himself and the pre-monarchic/Davidic period. In other words, Jacob’s own viewpoint is that of Israel in the time of the judges, though it presupposes the dominance of Judah and the Joseph clans.[[593]](#footnote-593) It makes no reference to the big events of the times of Moses and Joshua, or to the separating of Levi as the ministerial clan; there is no hint of the division of the monarchy,[[594]](#footnote-594) or of the exile or the circumstances of the Second Temple period. To say that the poem draws attention to the period of the judges and of David is to say nothing about when it was composed; it is simply to say that these are the periods the poem invites the audience to focus on.

The testament covers Jacob’s twelve original sons, in another distinctive order compared with previous listings:

Gen 29—30 Gen 46 Gen 49

Leah Reuben Leah Reuben Reuben

Simeon Simeon Simeon

Levi Levi Levi

Judah Judah Judah

Bilhah Dan Issachar Zebulun

Naphtali Zebulun Issachar

Zilpah Gad Zilpah Gad Dan

Asher Asher Gad

Leah Issachar Rachel Joseph Asher

Zebulun Benjamin Napthali

Rachel Joseph Bilhah Dan Joseph

Benjamin Naphtali Benjamin

it’s not clear why Zebulun precedes Issachar here only. Deut 33 has yet another order for its blessings, an approximate geographical order that again starts with Reuben and works clockwise.

The question underlying the testament is, how should Israel think of the situation and experience of the twelve clans? It serves to mediate between the persons of the twelve sons and the destiny of the clans that will grow from them (vv. 1-2 focus on the sons, but v. 28 retrospectively links the pronouncements with the clans). Genesis has referred to the actions or experiences of five of the brothers as individuals, Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Joseph, and Judah, and their actions or experiences are the main background to Jacob’s declarations about the first three and part of the background in connection with Judah and Joseph. For the six brothers who come between Judah and Joseph, Jacob’s declarations relate to the geographical positions of the clans that will issue from them; it is also the other consideration that applies to Joseph. For Benjamin the declaration relates to his clan’s later action, though this consideration also applies to Judah. Jacob sometimes expresses his own commitment or hopes. One way or another, the testament thus provides some account of the way:

* Reuben fails to have the prominence that one would expect.
* Simeon and Levi disappear geographically from the number of the clans.
* Judah provides Israel with its leadership.
* Zebulun’s territory lies between the two seas.
* Issachar has fine territory in Jezreel but has to submit to the Canaanites there.
* Dan has to fight for territory in the southwest and then in the north.
* Gad has to defend itself from its rivals for territory east of the Jordan.
* Asher has rich country on the northwest coast.
* Naphtali has broad rolling pastures to the north.
* Joseph thrives in a way that manifests the persistence its ancestor showed.
* Benjamin is especially violent

The declarations include a variety of verb forms, with some possible ambiguity in their significance. I have translated them as deriving their significance from the fact that they feature on the lips of Jacob at his stage in the First Testament story and have rendered them as follows.

* There are some modal forms: verbs preceded by *’al* in vv. 4 and 6, and a jussive in v. 17. These forms are related in substance to the curse in v. 7 and the declaration of trust which suggests the context of prayer in v. 18.
* There are many other yiqtols (including yiqtols preceded by *lō’*) which all make sense as having future reference from Jacob’s perspective.
* Some qatal verbs refer to the past from Jacob’s perspective (e.g., vv. 4, 23-24); I translate them as aorists.
* Many qatal verbs refer to that which is future from Jacob’s perspective but is spoken of as if it has already happened because it is so certain, being set in the context of Jacob’s vision (e.g., vv. 9, 11, 15); I translate these as perfect.

**49:1-2**. The father of the twelve male ancestors of the twelve Israelite clans speaks, the father whose original name was Jacob but who was also himself Israel. He is able to tell the twelve ancestors and thus the twelve clans themselves something about the clans’ destiny. So he speaks like a prophet and also like the father instructing his son in Proverbs. In referring to “days to come” (*’aḥărît hayyāmîm*),he is not alluding to “the end of the days” in the sense of the end of time. His expression does suggest a period that can be distinguished from the present time, and one that will probably not arrive next week. It will be a time that is not merely a continuation of this time, and one that does introduce a new situation—virtually the beginning of a new age. The other occasions when the Torah uses this expression, it is looking forward from the position of Israel outside the promised land to what will happen after it enters the land, to the reign of David, to the exile, and to God’s restoring the people from exile (Num 24:14; Deut 4:30; 31:29). Here it similarly looks beyond the present life of Jacob and his sons to the life of the clans when they have left Egypt and settled properly in Canaan. But a phrase that literally denotes “the end of the days” could come to suggest the end of the age, the end of our time. For the later Jewish community it could come to suggest “the end of the exile”[[595]](#footnote-595) and in light of the fact that that the end of the ages has come in Jesus (1 Cor 10:11) it could be natural to take Jacob to be speaking of the “last days.”[[596]](#footnote-596)

**49:3-4.** For the background, see 29:31-32; 35:22. Reuben has inherited an abundance of energy and forcefulness because he was Jacob’s firstborn; he is thus the first fruit of his father’s manly strength (cf. Deut 21:17; Ps 78:51). One might half-expect a first child to be full of such dynamism and vitality. But there are also temptations attaching to the position of number one, and Reuben fell for them. In light of what follows, one might imagine Jacob also being aware of the other possible meaning of *rē’šît ’ônî*, “the initiation of my trouble.”[[597]](#footnote-597)

Despite the excellence of his position and his energy (v. 4), Reuben will therefore not excel in the future. Typically, poetry sucks us into one direction, then discomforts us.[[598]](#footnote-598) Because of his “grab for power” he “will cease to be foremost.”[[599]](#footnote-599) “You would have been worthy of the birthright, the dignity of the priesthood and the kingship. But because you sinned, my son, the birthright was given to Joseph, the kingship to Judah, and the priesthood to Levi” (TgPsJ). Reuben will be overcome by tumult like that of the rushing water in a wadi after a storm.[[600]](#footnote-600) Jacob is speaking of Reuben the individual, but he implies that his descendants will be affected by his demotion from primacy among the brothers. Deborah critiques their lack of energy (Judg 5:15-16).[[601]](#footnote-601) And the clan of Reuben does subsequently fade into relative insignificance. But in Deut 33:6 Moses prays that Reuben may not actually die out, later parts of the First Testament occasionally refers to the Reubenites, and Ezek 48 and Rev 7 make sure they have a place in the future. Jacob’s reference to Reuben polluting his bed (the verb *ḥālal* piel) compares and contrasts with the reference to Shechem defiling Dinah (*ṭāmē’* piel). The curt condemnation comprising v. 4b closes the declaration. Following on the plural word for “bed,” the repetition of the verb “climbed” draws further attention to the impressive nature of that bed; normally one lies “down” on a mat on the floor.

**49:5-7**. For the background, see 34:25-30. Simeon and Levi are full brothers, but they also have four other full brothers. The further special brotherhood between Simeon and Levi is a brotherhood in violence. They were experts with blades: indirectly they used blades to get Shechem’s townsmen to accept circumcision and then directly they used blades to kill them.

Jacob abhorred the plan they formulated and implemented (v. 6a) and does not wish to be associated with any group that makes plans their way. His act of dissociation from their council/congregation will be matched by the blessing in Ps 1:1, where the words recur—the parallelism of “person” and “soul” also suggests the Psalms.[[602]](#footnote-602)

The “someone” and the “ox” (v. 6b) are collectives: one does not have to ask about a single individual who is their victim. There need not be anything wrong with killing someone in anger—at least, God does so, and Moses in his anger commissions people to do so at Sinai, and (oddly enough) the Levites especially respond (Exod 32:26-29). Literal hamstringing also might not be wrong (Yahweh commissions it in Josh 11:6). Here the parallelism signals that hamstringing oxen is a metaphor for killing people. And alongside the parallelism of men and oxen and of killing and hamstringing is the parallelism of anger and pleasure, and this parallel finally indicates one aspect of what was wrong in the brothers’ action: in Dan 8:4; 11:3, 16, 36 “pleasure” (*rāṣōn*) suggests doing what you like, fulfilling your own self-driven plans.

Jacob then comments further (v. 7a) on their anger and suggests another aspect of what was wrong about it. It was so strong: ironically, it is the adjective from the quality of “strength” associated with Reuben in v. 3. The overflowing of their rage was tough (*qāšāh*)—the root used of Rachel’s labor pains and of the way Joseph first spoke to his brothers (35:16-17; 42:7, 30). Jacob gives no concrete reason for cursing Simeon and Levi’s ruthless anger as opposed to that of Moses or Saul. He just knows it was wrong and feels free to declare a curse on the brothers (like Noah in 9:25)—or rather, on their anger and their outburst.

The consequence will be their dispersion (v. 7b). In this closing abrupt and solemn line of judgment, Jacob speaks as if he were God (who is addressed in the second person in v. 18 and referred to in the third person in vv. 24-25). Perhaps speaking in this way link with a sense that cursing is God’s business more than that of human beings—or that when someone curses, they are taking the risk of being godlike. Being divided (*ḥālaq*)would not be unequivocally a threat (see 14:15, the verb’s only other occurrence in Genesis). Nor would being dispersed (*pûṣ*; see 10:18), but the connotations of dispersal are more often negative (see 11:4, 8, 9): what the nations feared but experienced will come to Simeon and Levi.[[603]](#footnote-603) The reference to the two clans and not just the brothers themselves is more overt than was the case with Reuben. Does Jacob imply that there can be no forgiveness for Simeon and Levi?[[604]](#footnote-604) There is no reference to such a possibility, any more than there had been for Reuben, though this omission does not deter TgNeoph from affirming that there was the possibility of forgiveness for him. But prophecies, blessings, and curses are always implicit challenges to a response, and the response plays a part in whether the words find fulfillment. Regarding Simeon and Levi, division and dispersal is as much preemptive as judgmental: it is designed to stop them indulging further in their angry violence. In the event, Levi as the ministerial clan will have towns spread around the promised land; Simeon will be enclosed within Judah (Num 35; Josh 19:1-9). Jacob says nothing about the harnessing of Levi’s violence (Exod 32) or of Levi becoming the ministerial clan. Deut 33:8-11 not surprisingly sees this development as a blessing; Simeon does not appear at all in Deut 33.

**49:8-12.** The critique of Reuben, Simeon, and Levi opens up the way for positive comments on Judah. Whereas Leah had associated Judah’s name with confessing or praising or acknowledging Yahweh (the verb *yādāh*), Jacob associates it with Judah’s brothers confessing or praising or acknowledging him, as they will when David becomes king. In David Judah will put down people such as the Philistines and the Moabites, and Judah’s brothers will bow down in recognition of him. The declaration compares and contrasts with Joseph’s dream which Jacob dismissed in 37:10. Israelites will sing of the way David has killed his ten thousands (1 Sam 18:7). God will have given him his enemies necks (2 Sam 22:41) as they turn tail before him. They will run for their lives, but David will catch up with them and his hand will grasp them.

So Jacob imagines Judah having the energy and spirit of a lion’s whelp (v. 9). Jacob can see Judah going (say) to fight the Philistines or Moabites and coming back up into the Judahite mountains with the plunder gained in the battle. He can see Judah then crouching and relaxed like a lion or a cougar—no one can make him get up again if he doesn’t feel like it.

And Judah is destined to be the long-time repository of rule in Israel (v. 10). A staff or scepter is a symbol of authority. While the feet are commonly a euphemism for the genitals and the vision could suggest that descendants of Judah will always rule, a ruler might simply hold his scepter between his feet as he sits. The second line declares that this rule will continue until it is acknowledged by all the peoples around. The word for tribute (*šay*) comes only here,[[605]](#footnote-605) and the word for obedience (*yiqhāh*)only here and in Prov 30:17. If anyone was on the way to having a descendant be king, one would have thought it was Joseph, but it will turn out to be otherwise.[[606]](#footnote-606) If in some respects the viewpoint or background of Gen 49 is the Judges period, Jacob’s blessing here “binds two chapters in history together; in the time of the judges, when the tribes became sedentary, the period of the kings is promised.”[[607]](#footnote-607) The perspective in Deut 33:7 is different: there Moses envisions the diminishing of Judahite power that came soon after David’s day. That vision implies an assumption regarding Judah that complements one about Reuben, Simeon, and Levi: as the fulfillment of threats to them depends on their response, so does fulfillment of promises to Judah.

There is more to Judah’s destiny than power (v. 11-12). If Judah rides a donkey, it suggests another sign of being in a significant position—he does not have to walk. But the point here is that he tethers his donkey to a vine. It would be risky; but he evidently possesses plentiful vineyards about which he can be a little cavalier and from which he gathers a plentiful grape harvest.[[608]](#footnote-608) The harvest is so abundant that treading the grapes results in a splashing about in them that makes him resemble someone bathing in wine. There will be so much wine to drink, v. 12 goes on to comment, that his eyes will seem wine-colored. This third line pairs wine with another image for the flourishing of nature. His country will flow with milk, as passages such as Exod 3:8 and 17 will soon be describing it: its pasturage will be so good that there are countless sheep and thus rivers of milk.

**49:13**. According to Josh 19:10-16, Zebulun’s land does not in fact lie either on the Mediterranean or on Kinneret. Indeed, the verses about Zebulun and the subsequent clans stand out for their lack of points of connection with other parts of the First Testament.[[609]](#footnote-609) The term “aphorism” which has been applied to the sayings in Gen 49 in general[[610]](#footnote-610) is also more applicable to them, though they are not universalizable in the manner of aphorisms in Proverbs. Zebulun does lie between the two seas (cf. Deut 33:18-19) in the center of the Jezreel plain, with Issachar to its east and Asher to its west. Sidon to the northwest perhaps stands for the Phoenicians as a whole with whom Zebulun could have come into contact in the area of the Akko Plain,[[611]](#footnote-611) and perhaps Zebulunites worked in the Phoenician coastal towns.[[612]](#footnote-612)

**49:14-15**. Issachar (who shares Deut 33:18-19 with Zebulun) will then have the eastern part of the Jezreel plain, land between Zebulun and the Jordan. It is also between the Samarian highlands and the highland of northern Galilee and thus between the sheepfolds. Issachar’s allocation is beautiful country, a great place to rest. But that expression turns out to be ironic. The problem with Issachar’s area is that it will be long dominated by the Canaanites, who will hold onto the plains when the Israelites are able to occupy the mountain areas. So Issachar will have to function as a conscript work horse for the Canaanites, the reverse of the way the Josh 16—17 and Judg 1 pictures things. The final colon brings the poetry down to earth with a bump. Being a sturdy donkey is not so good after all.

**49:16-18.** The comment on Dan starts off from the name, which brings to mind a verb meaning “govern.” But the comment presupposes Dan’s inability to come into possession of the land allocated to it, in the southwest in the area round modern Tel Aviv (Josh 19:47). In this sense it did not succeed in sharing in the government of the land. Jacob promises that it will. It will not lose its place as one of the clans. And it did gain its permanent home by migrating to the far northeast (Josh 19:47b; Judg 18).

The image of the snake or viper (v. 17) might suggest Danite involvement in “guerilla warfare” against the Canaanites with their chariots, in the area originally allocated to it,[[613]](#footnote-613) or to the activity of the great Danite adventurer in Judges 13—16 (so Tg). The Bashan lion provides an alternative mage in Deut 33:22. The snake image is not accusatory.[[614]](#footnote-614)

The subsequent confession (v. 18) corresponds to lines in the Psalms; the verb and the word order are different from 119:166, but the substance is the same.[[615]](#footnote-615) In the Psalms such a confession occurs as a statement of faith concerning a deliverance not yet experienced, which fits the context here. There is nothing to suggest it is Dan’s own confession rather than Jacob’s prayer for Dan, which compares with Jacob’s other personal comments in vv. 6-7.

**49:19.** Gad’s territory will be across the Jordan and bordering Ammon, so it will be vulnerable to attack in a way many clans were not. The First Testament refers specifically to trouble coming to Gad (2 Kings 10:33; Jer 49:1), but Gad shared with Reuben and Manasseh the broader area referred to as Gilead, and references to trouble in Gilead (e.g., Judg 10—12; 1 Sam 11; 1 Kings 22; Amos 1:3, 13) may well be references to trouble in Gad. Other clans thus shared Gad’s vulnerability. There is some irony in Jacob speaking of a clan attacking someone else’s heel (cf. 25:26; 27:36). Presumably his comment implies that Gad, too, is snake-like (cf. 3:15), though not in a bad way; Gad, like Dan, is compared with a lion in Deut 33:20-21.

**49:20**. Asher will occupy fertile land and the sea coast from Mount Carmel north to the border of the promised land. It will thus produce food fit for a king. The audience might recall that Asher’s name would make one think of blessing (cf. 30:13). “Rich” is etymologically “oily,” which might imply a reference to the richness of Asher’s olive production (cf. Deut 33:24).

**49:21.** Naphtali’s land stretches north-south next to Asher’s but is thus inland. It extends to include the western shore of Lake Kinneret and the Jordan valley running north to the border of the land (though the northernmost part was appropriated by Dan when it moved from the southwest). Whereas Deut 33:23 speaks of its richness in more literal terms that compare with the ones Jacob uses of Asher, Jacob confines himself to a single animal image for Naphtali, but the image also rejoices in Naphtali’s liveliness and fruitfulness.

**49:22-26**. Not surprisingly, Joseph gets extensive space, about the same as Judah. While Judah is the ancestor of the clan that produces David, Joseph is the son who in the person of his own sons inherits the position of firstborn (1 Chron 5:1-3).[[616]](#footnote-616) The portrait of Joseph combines fruitfulness and activism, and the same combination appears in Deut 33:13-17, with the description of fruitfulness being at points verbally identical; opinions vary on whether one of the passages is dependent on the other or both are dependent on some traditional formulation.

Though Joseph must surely come next (v. 22a) because only he and Benjamin remain for mention, Jacob does not immediately name him, as he names the son at the beginning of each other saying. And in light of the treatment of Joseph’s sons in Gen 48 and of the combined mention of Simeon and Levi in vv. 5-7 we might expect Jacob to be concerned with Joseph’s two sons in the paragraph about Joseph. While eventually Jacob does name Joseph, lo and behold, the first word in this verse is “son.” Then the second is *pōrāt*, a word that comes only here but could suggest a fruitful tree (cf. Tg, LXX, Vg), and the Joseph clans will indeed flourish spectacularly within Israel; but the word also makes one think of the name of Ephraim, the son blessed as if he were Joseph’s firstborn, whose name was linked with the verb lying behind *pōrāt* when he was born (see 41:52). Directly or overtly Jacob speaks only of Joseph, but Ephraim is hiding between the formulation of his words.[[617]](#footnote-617)

Its subject is Joseph the *pōrāt* and by implication his or its daughters—though they do not have a proper syntactical place in the verse. These cola also require the audience to think again about the meaning of *pōrāt*,[[618]](#footnote-618) which also resembles the word for a wild donkey (*pere’*: cf. 16:12), of which *pōrāt* could be the feminine;[[619]](#footnote-619) *’Eprātî* can mean Ephraimite, sothe feminine-looking word could facilitate the paronomasia. That understanding leads well into the reference to striding: the verb is feminine and suggests something animate. So the Joseph clan is a female donkey (evidently not an insult), an understanding that fits the animal imagery used to characterize other brothers in vv. 9, 14, 17, 21, and 27. Joseph’s daughters are equivalent to Judah’s daughters (e.g., Pss 48:11 [12]; 97:8), the villages in Joseph’s territory. The line then suggests that Joseph (especially in the person of Ephraim) has the energy and agility that ranges free by springs and by the walled terraces that stretch along mountain slopes.

Jacob goes on to speak of Joseph himself rather than the clan (vv. 23-24a). Joseph is now a warrior whose arms and hands manipulate his taut bow, which fits the image of a wild donkey back in v. 22 better than the image of a tree. If he is a warrior under attack, who are the attackers? Tg sees Joseph as defeating the Egyptian diviners, which he did, but the only attack on Joseph that Genesis has mentioned is the one in Gen 37, when the brothers were furious with him because of his dreams. Even in taking aim at him verbally they were like archers shooting arrows at him.[[620]](#footnote-620)

But he was someone who could stand firm under attack (v. 24b), because of the supernatural support he received. Jacob offers another version of the interwoven nature of the human will and the divine will. Not only was God involved in Joseph’s destiny in order to achieve something for the entire family, so that his will and the brothers’ will worked together in a paradoxical fashion; God’s involvement meant that his energy and Joseph’s energy mysteriously worked together. Jacob describes God in a sequence of parallel cola incorporating a series of images that speak of Jacob’s God as also Joseph’s God. He is Jacob’s strong man (*’ābîr*), one with the strength of a bull or a warrior (*’abbîr*), someone who fights for you and cannot be defeated. He is (Jacob’s) shepherd, who guides and protects the sheep as Jacob has his sheep. He is Israel’s stone, a unique title contrasting with the idea of God as Israel’s crag or rock (*ṣûr*). The parallelism of the cola suggests that “Israel” refers to Jacob himself, and the significance of stones for Jacob might suggest that God is a protection and a lasting witness (28:10-18; 31:45-46; 35:14).

Whereas the context in Genesis suggests reading the verbs in vv. 23-24a in light of the way Joseph’s brothers once treated him, so that v. 24b spoke of God’s defense of him in light of their hostility, these new verbal clauses speak of the future. The way God has protected him is the way God will protect him. The first colon couples “God” (*’ēl*) and “your Father” as the previous one coupled “Shepherd” and “Stone.” God is “your Father,” as Moses will say to Israel (Deut 32:6), the one to whom Israel can say “my Father” (Jer 3:4, 19), the one to whom David can say “my Father” (Ps 89:26 [27]. For God to be his Father has similar implications to God’s being the Shepherd: he is the faithful one who is committed to and protective of him. His being helper restates the point again; helping (*‘āzar*) characteristically suggests not a mere bit of assistance in a task that someone couldn’t quite do alone but a decisive act of deliverance in a predicament that someone could never escape. The verb follows on the description of God as “stone of Israel,” which suggests a comparison with Samuel’s talk of a “help stone” (1 Sam 7:12). To follow “God” (*’ēl*) one might have expected *Shadday*; and in the parallelism of the cola *Shadday* duly appears (the two halves of the title are divided between two cola in other passages such as Job 8:3, 5). Jacob’s reference to God as Shadday reopens questions about the ambiguous imagery in v. 22, supporting reference both to activity and to fertility there. The verb *šādad* can suggest taking violent action against someone; it is the link made between this root and the name Shadday in Isa 13:6. But Jacob takes the name’s significance in a different direction in speaking of Shadday who blesses you; six forms of the words “bless/blessing” come in six successive cola. The stress on blessing takes one back to the possibility in v. 22 of Joseph being a fruitful tree by a spring or by a terrace, which would fit the idea of blessings from above—the blessing that comes from the gift of rain. “Blessing” and “help” complement each other.

Further, “breasts” is *šādayim*; in this context the name Shadday could make the listeners think of such happy human fruitfulness on the part of Joseph’s clan(s). In upbeat terns such as we are not used to hearing from his lips, Jacob acknowledges that the blessings he has received have been extraordinary. These twelve sons would be a spectacular embodiment of his blessing. They sure exceed the blessing of his parents with their two children and his grandparents with their one or two. The application to a male of the verb “conceive” recurs in Num 11:12: Ps 7:14 [15]; Isa 59:4. The parallel colon again returns to the theme of fruitfulness in the world of nature.[[621]](#footnote-621)

The theme continues in Jacob’s final blessing on Joseph (v. 26b); the positive acknowledgment of God’s blessing serves this concern. Jacob wants the same blessing for his favorite son. In the 3-3 line’s parallelism, the head is where one who is set apart, a *nāzîr*, has his distinction (see Num 6).[[622]](#footnote-622) The implications of being “set apart” (*nāzîr*) vary: the word can apply to someone who is especially dedicated, but here the context suggests that Jacob calls down special treatment of Joseph because he is, after all, his own favorite son, and because God is indeed going to give his clan(s) a position of leadership.

**49:27**. There is one more son to be blessed. But eating and dividing seem logically back-to-front (one would divide and then eat), but this oddity points to a move from the metaphorical to the literal: Benjamin will be literally a fighting force that takes plunder. Nothing in what we know of Benjamin as an individual explains the terms that Jacob uses (Deut 33:12 fits it better), but the story of the Benjamin clan fits his description (see Judg 20—21), as do the exploits of the great Benjaminites Saul and Jonathan (1 Sam 10—14).

## Testament, Poetry, Theology

Gen 49 invites listeners to see the outworking of events in the life of the ancestors and of the clans as part of a big picture and as having a meaning within that context. They are not random or chance. They are not “the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving,” so that a member of each clan would infer that “his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms.”[[623]](#footnote-623) Here, “Father Jacob” lays out the fruit of his insight to his sons, as “Father Solomon” will later lay out his insight to his sons, in Prov 1—9. Both teachers speak in poetry, which makes for some denseness and memorability, and allows the average line to look at its subject from two angles and sustain interest. But Solomon’s poetry in Proverbs works by being univocal. There may be double meanings (the strange woman may be an allegorical figure) but the surface meaning is clear and important. Jacob’s poetry is denser and thrives on being equivocal.

The actual authors of Gen 49 and of Prov 1—9 hide discretely away behind Jacob and Solomon; they draw attention away from themselves and enhance the impact of their teaching by inviting their audiences to collude with them in imagining it on the lips of these key figures. In neither case do we know the author’s identity. But there is no great scholarly heart-searching about the background of Prov 1—9, whereas the background of Gen 49 is a mystery and scholarly study of it is in disarray. More than one commentator observes ruefully that there is nothing like a scholarly consensus on the interpretation of aspects of Jacob’s words (with no sense of irony over the fact that anyway one generation’s scholarly consensus is the next generation’s out of date misconception).

While “Jacob” does introduce himself as a teacher instructing his sons (v. 2), he precedes that introduction by speaking of himself as more like a prophet who will declare what is to happen in days to come (v. 1), and prophets speak in dense and puzzling ways. Jacob is as much like Hosea as like Solomon. Hosea makes for an apposite comparison because he is a northerner, and there are hints of northern forms of speech in Gen 49[[624]](#footnote-624) (thus unusual forms of speech and unusual expressions are no indication of an early date). Hosea is also more puzzling than (say) Amos, he likes paronomasia as Jacob does, and he likes animal imagery as Jacob does. Some of the impasse over Jacob’s poetry (as over aspects of Hosea) derives from the assumption that “Jacob” surely spoke univocally. And there are advantages about being easy to understand. But it is also possible to make things too easy for people, with the result that they get it at one level but at another level fail to get it, and sometimes the necessity of working hard to understand ultimately helps understanding. When Jacob is difficult to understand, the answer may be to work with the puzzles and the ambiguities rather than seeking to eliminate them.

In terms of substance, a key characteristic of poetry that features in the testament is its use of imagery, in metaphor and simile. “In elevation, power, and richness of imagery, [Jacob’s] words surpass other similar poetic utterances” such as those in Gen 27,[[625]](#footnote-625) or (we might add) Deut 33. Such imagery both adds to the content, power, and effectiveness of the lines, and occasionally adds to the difficulty of understanding. “Normal words are not involved here, but those that are miraculous, effective, and productive.”[[626]](#footnote-626) They are designed to communicate even when they are allusive and elliptical. They are a challenge to interpretation, like Jesus’s parables and some First Testament prophecies.

If we seek to express the implications of Jacob’s words in prosaic terms, what results? The question underlying the testament is, how should Israel think of the situation and experience of the twelve clans? Part of the perspective it suggests is, the clans’ destiny relates sometimes to the action of their ancestors, sometimes to aspects of their political situation, sometimes to factors in their geographical position (“All the sayings—with or without blessing—show a deft attention to the role that each environmental microsystem has played in shaping tribal identity”).[[627]](#footnote-627) Always their experience forms part of the outworking of Jacob’s words. Further, Jacob’s words imply the assumption that there can be something revelatory about words themselves (e.g., v. 19), as well as something revelatory about animals, who feature so prominently in the sayings.

Traditional interpretation assumes that the declarations report Jacob’s actual words near the end of his life. Modern interpretation assumes that they are a collection of sayings resulting from reflection on events from Israel’s history. God can inspire both forms of declaration—Daniel’s visions incorporate both. Genesis as a whole does not simply transcribe events but tells stories that have varying relationships to actual events. One might compare Gen 49 with Gen 1, which gives us no information on the literal, concrete process whereby God brought the world into being but does give us information on what God was doing in bringing the world into being. Or one might compare Gen 49 with Dan 11, which expresses itself as talk about the future but is nearly all talk about the past; expressing an account of the past as prophecy makes clear that the sequence of events was under God’s control. Much Gen 49 reflects the actual experience of the twelve clans, which is projected back into Jacob’s awareness to express how it was not chance but part of a coherent broader story going back to the ancestor who gave Israel its name. Whereas 25:23 tells the audience that Rebekah’s revelation came from Yahweh, Gen 37 does not make the same comment about Joseph’s dreams, and neither does Gen 49 about Jacob’s revelations; the same mixed pattern appears in Daniel. In Genesis, it was no ordinary human being who passed on what seem to be revelations from God, but Israel’s original father figure. Further, while some of Jacob’s words are statements, some are prayers, and prophecy regularly presupposes the assumption that what actually happens will depend on an interaction between God’s declarations of intent and people’s response to them.

What Jacob had to say to each clan was significant for all the clans. And the inclusion of his testament in the Scriptures implies that it continues to be significant for the people of God.

1. Reuben needed to learn that one act whereby he grossly flouted society’s proper values in the realm of family and sex could have disastrous results for his clan. The same applied to Simeon and Levi in the realm of violence. (Outside the framework of this testament, Levi found that God could use its violence and make Levi his servant.)
2. The clans as a whole would properly acknowledge Judah for the achievements that stemmed from its violence, and for its marvelous flourishing, and so would the peoples who submitted to him. (As they did, outside the framework of this testament, in David’s day, though Judah’s hegemony and flourishing did not last, so that for a later audience Jacob’s words would raise the question whether that hegemony and flourishing would return—as prophets said they would.)
3. Zebulun, Issachar, Dan, Asher, Naphtali, and Benjamin would have futures which involved an interaction between their geographical position with its blessings, their political positon with its threats, and their personal qualities with their potentials.
4. Joseph has already had to deal with hostility but has survived and triumphed through his own firmness and agility and the support and blessing of God, which will also issue in blessing in the future that parallels Judah’s. (As they did outside the framework of this testament in the flourishing of the northern kingdom, though this blessing, too, did not last—but prophets again said they would return.)

# Genesis 49.28 – 50.26— How Jacob Dies, and the Aftermath

## Overview

Jacob speaks of his imminent death and of how they should ensure that he gets buried in Canaan, and his family do as he says. Joseph’s brothers are then afraid that his passing will leave Joseph free to avenge their treatment of him, and he explains why it is not an issue for him. Joseph, too, then speaks of his imminent death and of how they should ensure that he eventually gets buried in Canaan, and his family do as he says.

## Translation

49:28All these are the twelve clans of Yiśra’el[[628]](#footnote-628) and this is what their father spoke to them. So he blessed them, each of whom he blessed in accordance with his blessing. 29Then he ordered them and said to them, “I am joining my people. Bury me with my forebears in the cave that’s in the field of Epron the Ḥētite, 30the cave that’s in the field at Double which is east of Mamre, in the country of Kena‘an, the field that Abraham acquired from Epron the Ḥētite as a burial holding 31There they buried Abraham and Sarah his wife, there they buried Yiṣḥāq and Ribqah his wife, there I buried Le’ah— 32an acquisition (the field and the cave that’s in it) from the Ḥētites.” 33Ya‘aqob finished giving orders to his sons and drew his feet into the bed, breathed out, and joined his kin. 50:1Yosep fell on his father’s face[[629]](#footnote-629) and cried over him and kissed him.

2Yosep ordered the physicians who were his servants to embalm his father. So the physicians embalmed Yiśra’el, 3and completed forty days for him, because that is how they would complete the days for embalmings.[[630]](#footnote-630) Miṣrayim cried for him seventy days. 4The days of crying for him passed, and Yosep spoke to Par‘oh’s household: “If I find favor in your eyes, please speak in Par‘oh’s ears and say, 5‘My father himself got me to swear, “Here, given that I am going to die: in the tomb that I dug[[631]](#footnote-631) for myself in the country of Kena‘an, there you’re to bury me.” So I will please now go up and bury my father, and come back.’” 6Par‘oh said, “Go up and bury your father as he got you to swear.”

7So Yosep went up to bury his father. All Par‘oh’s servants went up with him, the senior people in his household, all the senior people in the country of Miṣrayim,[[632]](#footnote-632) 8Yosep’s entire household, his brothers, and his father’s household. Only the little ones, and their flock and their herd, did they abandon in the Gošen region. 9Both chariotry and cavalry went up with him. It was a very substantial camp. 10They came to the Thorn Threshing Floor, which is across the Jordan, and held a very big and solemn lamentation there. He made seven days of mourning for his father. 11The Kena‘anite inhabitants of the country saw the mourning at the Thorn Threshing Floor and said, “This is a serious mourning on the part of Miṣrayim.” Hence it was called “Miṣrayim’s Mourning Meadow,”[[633]](#footnote-633) which is across the Jordan.

12So his sons did for him as he had ordered them. 13His sons carried him to the country of Kena‘an and buried him in the cave in the field at Double, the field that Abraham acquired as a burial holding from Epron the Ḥetite, east of Mamre. 14Then Yosep went back to Miṣrayim, he and his brothers and all the people who had gone up with him to bury his father, after he had buried his father.

15Yosep’s brothers saw[[634]](#footnote-634) that their father was dead, and said, “If Yosep feels hostile to us and turns right back[[635]](#footnote-635) on us all the bad dealing that we did to him….”[[636]](#footnote-636) 16So they gave orders[[637]](#footnote-637) to Yosep: “Your father gave orders before his death: 17‘Say this to Yosep: Oh, please carry your brothers’ offence and their wrongdoing, in that they acted badly with you.’ So now please carry the offense of the servants of your father’s God.” Yosep cried when they spoke to him.

18His brothers indeed came and fell before him and said, “Here are we as servants to you,” 19but Yosep said to them, “Don’t be afraid, because am I in the place of God? 20Whereas you yourselves intended something bad for me, God intended it for good, in order to act today so as to keep alive a numerous people. 21So now, don’t be afraid. I myself will provide for you and your little ones.” Thus he consoled them and encouraged[[638]](#footnote-638) them.

22So Yosep lived in Miṣrayim, he and his father’s household. Yosep lived a hundred and ten years 23and saw the third generation[[639]](#footnote-639) of Eprayim; the children of Makir, son of Menaššeh, were also born on Yosep’s knees. 24Then Yosep said to his brothers, “I’m going to die, but God—he will definitely attend to you and take you up from this country to the country that he swore to Abraham, to Yiṣḥaq, and to Ya‘aqob.” 25Yosep got the sons of Yiśra’el to swear, “God will definitely attend to you, and you’re to take up my bones from here.” 26Yosep died as a man of a hundred and ten years. They embalmed him and he was put[[640]](#footnote-640) in a chest in Miṣrayim.

## Interpretation

The account of Jacob’s testament leads straight into the account of his death and of Joseph’s death. But it is convenient to make a break somewhere in 49:1—50:26, and the resumptive conclusion/introduction at 49:28 provides a suitable place to do so; the medieval chapter division between Gen 49 and 50 divides the testament and the dying from its aftermath. MT’s closing unit is 49:27—50:26; the break before rather than after the Benjamin blessing looks whimsical, but it does correspond to MT’s break at 49:12—that is, these two breaks draw attention to the Judah and Joseph blessings. In principle it does seem appropriate to link the last verses of Gen 49 with what follows; it marks how Genesis’s double ending relates the double deaths and embalmings of Jacob and Joseph, both being preceded by an appeal for their remains to return to Canaan.[[641]](#footnote-641) I thus treat 49:28—50:26 as one unit, closing Genesis as a whole. It is surprising that Genesis closes with the account of Joseph’s passing, almost as if Gen 37—50 turns out to be the Joseph story after all.[[642]](#footnote-642) But Joseph has been central in the story of “Jacob’s lines of descent” since Gen 37. Further, the closing reference to Joseph is an aspect of the way Gen 50 and Exod 1 interrelate (see especially Exod 1:8), and the account of Joseph’s death does make explicit that it looks forward to what follows.

**49:28—50:1**. The opening verse is both a conclusion and an introduction. It summarizes where we have been, and in itself it is simply a conclusion to what precedes. But v. 29 will begin simply “and he,” so that it needs v. 28 as an introduction. The verse does stand in slight tension with vv. 1-27. First, it speaks explicitly of the “twelve clans” rather than the “twelve sons,” in the first mention of the “twelve clans” in the Scriptures. Either term would have been appropriate here: 49:1-27 related both to the individuals and to the clans to which they gave their names, with the sons sometimes in more focus and the clans sometimes in more focus. Second, the conclusion/introduction three times speaks of blessing, whereas the contents of vv. 3-27 have been more equivocal than this word implies. The testament began with something more like curses—indeed, that word came in v. 7. Perhaps the implication is that each clan to whom a blessing was appropriate received the appropriate blessing.

Jacob’s instructions about his burial follow (vv. 29-32); the common verb “order” (*ṣāwāh* piel) can be used in particular to denote someone’s dying “will” (e.g., Deut 3:28; 2 Kings 20:1).[[643]](#footnote-643) Whereas Genesis has elsewhere spoken of people joining their kin (the plural of the word *‘am*; 25:8, 17; 35:29; the expression will recur here in v. 33)[[644]](#footnote-644) Jacob himself speaks of joining “my people” (*‘am* singular—the distinction is purely one of pointing, since consonantally either first-person expression would be *‘my*). “My people” can suggest the broader “people of Israel” who are coming more into focus as the Genesis scroll nears its end, though Jacob’s succeeding words draw more attention to his own family. He makes a general point about burial, that it is natural to want to be buried with them. As the folk/gospel song puts it, “I'm going there to see my father, I'm going there no more to roam, I’m just going over Jordan, I’m just going over home.” Yet the way he expresses that desire links with the broader point, in that Jacob wants to be buried in the promised land. In the short term, he won’t be joining his family or his people in body, only in spirit, and in speaking of joining them, he uses a conventional expression for death.[[645]](#footnote-645) But the conventional expression reminds the audience of something important. “No matter how long his children remain in Egypt. Jacob knows that Canaan is his home.”[[646]](#footnote-646)

The continuing lack of the verb “die” (49:33) and the repetition of the idea of joining one’s kin or people (cf. 25:8, 17; 35:29: where the verb “died” did come)[[647]](#footnote-647) again puts the emphasis on the positive side to “breathing out.” Here the place of “died” is taken by the unique expression “drew his feet into the bed.” Jacob is getting ready to pass away; “drew” (*’āsap* qal) is a form of the verb for “join” (*’āsap* niphal) which follows. He is settling down to die. [[648]](#footnote-648) Genesis speaks of it “as though accepting the event with enjoyment.”[[649]](#footnote-649) Yet “there is something very sober about the dying of the father of Israel. With respect to his own lot the dying man is neither especially sorrowful nor especially hopeful. There is no stirring gesture in the face of death…. But precisely in this, these narratives about the deaths of the patriarchs show obedience to the reality of death.”[[650]](#footnote-650)

Presumably the other brothers were grieved, too (50:1), but the story is told from Joseph’s angle because of his central place at this stage in Genesis’s story.

**50:2-6**. Whileit may seem odd to associate physicians (literally, “healers”) with embalming, embalming and mummification involves considerable surgery, including the removal of the brains and internal organs.

The account of Jacob’s embalming (v. 3), the first stage of mummification, and of the mourning for him, expresses how important a person Jacob was. It was especially kings who were mummified, and forty days is a long time to spend over embalming.[[651]](#footnote-651) Diodorus Siculus 1:72 and 1:91 talks in terms of thirty days for embalming and of seventy-two days’ mourning for a king in Egypt, while Herodotus 1:86-88 speaks of a seventy-day period following the embalming.[[652]](#footnote-652) Israel will mourn Aaron and Moses for thirty days (Num 20:29; Deut 34:8), so perhaps Jacob’s seventy days of mourning covers forty days of embalming followed by a thirty-day mourning. Whereas in Egypt mummification was an act of preparation for resurrection life, Israelites did not expect bodily resurrection but only a continuing semi-life in Sheol (the irony is that the Egyptians were right for the wrong reasons and the Israelites were wrong for the right reasons: there would be resurrection but only on the basis of Jesus’s resurrection). To put it another way, the basis of Israel’s hope was God’s promise of ongoing life in Canaan, and for Jacob and Joseph, mummification could make that possible. But both for Egyptians and for Israelites, mummification was an option only for really important people.

Joseph’s sending word to Pharaoh (vv. 4-5) might issue from his own involvement in the mourning which would make him unpresentable and/or defiling, or it might just mean he is being deferential. His request to go up to Canaan to bury Jacob carries subtle undertones as it anticipates Moses’s plea for the Israelites to take a trip out of Egypt, along with the awareness that Joseph might therefore be planning not to come back. Joseph has Jacob speaking loosely about his burial place, which actually his grandfather metaphorically dug (Nicolas of Lyra suggests that Jacob had dug his own place in the cave);[[653]](#footnote-653) once again, Genesis has one of its characters speaking in a way that differs from the previous account. Here, Joseph speaks in terms that would make sense to an Egyptian.[[654]](#footnote-654) While the account of Jacob’s passing has given another expression of Joseph’s deep embedding in Egypt, it also expresses how deep is the two-way nature of his position. In a sense Jacob dies an Egyptian, but his dying an Egyptian is framed by an insistence and a report such as make clear that he does nothing of the sort.[[655]](#footnote-655) The story is an exercise in “identity politics,” about the way the members of a marginalized community assert ways of understanding themselves with their distinctive reality of self and community, which has been an issue through the Joseph story.[[656]](#footnote-656)

The undertones in Joseph’s request to “go up” become louder (v. 6) as Pharaoh says, “Go up!” and the verb recurs in vv. 7, 9, 14, 24, 25, and the audience recalls God’s promise to Jacob in 46:4, which made an emphatic double use of that verb.

**50:7-14.** The account of thefuneral journey with military escort continues to underline the two-way embedding. Leaving the little ones and the herds behind would provide evidence that they intended to return (cf. Exod 10:7-11). The next Egyptian camp will be a hostile one pursuing Jacob’s people (Exod 14:19-24).

The funeral party’s journey (vv. 10-11) also continues to anticipate the future. The obvious route to Mamre would take it up the Mediterranean coast, so that the Thorn Threshing Floor and Abel Miṣrayim would be in that area, in the region where the Philistines later had their towns. But the narrative twice describes these places as “across the Jordan,” or perhaps “at the side of the Jordan.” [[657]](#footnote-657) While people on the east of the Jordan can speak of the west side as “across the Jordan” (e.g., Num 32:19; Deut 3:20; Josh 5:1—the “West Bank” was once part of “Transjordan”), it is hard to picture these verses as taking that perspective, especially to refer to places on the Mediterranean. More likely the funeral party is pictured as taking the route the later Israelites would take and halting by the Jordan before entering the promised land from the east, on the way up to Mamre. From there Canaanites could be pictured as aware of what was going from their side of the Jordan. Either way, the entire party holds its further lamentation there. Joseph does a son’s proper seven days mourning (cf. 1 Sam 31:13; Job 2:13) at the Thorn Threshing Floor; it will be so called because it was enclosed by a thorn hedge and/or because the thorn hedge provided the means of winnowing.

The brothers (vv. 12-14)—in other words, the family, not the Egyptians—then transport Jacob into the promised land, onto the mountain ridge of Canaan proper, to Mamre, where they inter him.

**50:15-21**. We might have thought that at 47:26 or 27 we had reached the end of the story of Joseph and his brothers and thus of Joseph himself, except for a note about his death that might eventually come. And we might not have noticed that Gen 45 told us nothing about the brothers’ response to Joseph’s revelation of himself except that they talked with him.[[658]](#footnote-658) Perhaps one cannot blame them, given the ambiguity of Joseph’s actions.[[659]](#footnote-659) But “what an almost incurable wound sin and an evil conscience are.” How easily the brothers sinned “but with what difficulty they are healed.”[[660]](#footnote-660)

The narrator and the brothers (vv. 16-17a) pick up from 49:29 the verb “order” where it had the sense of the charge that someone may give dying; the odd repetition of the verb in v. 16 is thus ironic. Genesis has not made any previous reference to Jacob giving a charge of the kind the brothers refer to (Josephus in *Antiquities* II, 8:1 writes it back into Jacob’s earlier words). When they appeal to what they say Jacob said, then, are they lying in their fearful attempt to forestall any subsequent revenge from Joseph? Do “they still rely on deception as a way of life”?[[661]](#footnote-661) More likely their words comprise yet another instance of Genesis amplifying or putting things differently when recapitulating earlier words or events and thus giving the audience something to think about and reason to keep reviewing the story they already know. The brothers do go on to acknowledge (indirectly!) their bad dealing, their offence, and their wrongdoing. And they have Jacob urging Joseph to be like God in carrying their wrongdoing, which is one of God’s characteristic practices (e.g., Exod 32:32; 34:7; Ps 25:18; 32:5). The basis of their appeal is their position as the servants of the God who is their God and Joseph’s God.

Is Joseph then distressed (v. 17b) because their words bring the past back to him, or because he’s sorry that they still think he might act in the way they describe, or because they speak of “your father” and of themselves as his servants, or because he’s moved that at last they now acknowledge their wrongdoing? His tears repeats a motif from 42:24; 43:30; 45:14, 15; 46:29; 50:1 and build up further the impression that Joseph had no interest in taking revenge on his brothers. While God expects human authorities to take action against wrongdoing, Joseph knows that it is the job of the individual (even the individual who is a person in authority) to turn the other cheek. Ancient Near Eastern wisdom urged people not to pay other people back for their wrongdoing,[[662]](#footnote-662) and the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings agree (e.g., Lev 19:18; Isa 53:1-9; Prov 24:29).[[663]](#footnote-663) Joseph accepts and lives by that principle.

The further reference to the brothers coming to Joseph (v. 18) might mean that they had originally sent the charge in vv. 16-17 via a third party. Jacob did something similar in Gen 32, but there the point was explicit. Here Genesis is more likely again giving a resumptive further report of the preceding event. Separating the giving of the charge from the going to bow down draws attention to the bowing down as a further fulfillment of Joseph’s dream. And the commitment to being Joseph’s servants underscores the fulfillment.

How is Joseph to respond (v. 19)? If he simply says, “Of course I will carry it,” would that help? In effect, his words presuppose an ellipse. It is more important to make certain other things explicit. First, the brothers are not to be afraid. It is a regular First Testament way of urging people to believe that they have nothing to worry about (if the word *šālôm* were used to mean inner peace, it could feature in an equivalent exhortation). Here Joseph will indicate the significance of the exhortation when he repeats it in v. 21. But before doing so, he protests that they are treating him as if he were God. He asks the accusatory rhetorical question that his father had once asked of his mother (30:2). Here as there the background to the question lies in what has just preceded. They said they were the servants of their father’s God. They then said they would be Joseph’s servants. He himself has pointed out that he is lord and ruler over all Egypt (45:8). And for a long time they had been addressing him as “lord” and speaking of themselves as his “servants” (e.g., 42:10; 44:16-24). They are willing to continue in that subservient relationship. But they said it because there were scared. If they are God’s servants (especially the servants of the one who is the God of their father and his father) and if God is thus their master, how can they talk in terms of Jacob as their master? He is not God! They are taking the implications of the dream too far. The Torah will later outlaw the idea of treating your brother as your servant, precisely because your brothers are Yahweh’s servants (Lev 25:39-42). Joseph makes that assumption. It’s easy for someone in power to think that they are God. They can do what they like and everyone should treat them as God. Joseph would be under unequalled temptation to think that way. But he does not. It’s said that the difference between God and us is that he doesn’t think he is us. Joseph’s rhetorical question implies a key principle in his theology and spirituality.

Paradoxically, one might say (v. 20), they have actually been unconsciously acting as God’s servants in the way they have treated Joseph. Joseph reformulates the point he made to them in 45:5-8, in a way that makes the antithesis of “good” and “bad” almost close Genesis as it almost began it.[[664]](#footnote-664) Once more Joseph’s point is not that “you intended what was bad, but God turned it to what was good” (so Vg), though that declaration may sometimes be applicable. If anything, God’s intention preceded theirs. Nor is his contrast the one that appears in the Psalms between human beings intending to do wrong to people and God intending to deliver them (Pss 40:5, 17; 14:1, 4),[[665]](#footnote-665) though that contrast does also describe how God acts with Joseph. His point is that they have been the unwitting executors of an intention that God had, as he said in 45:5-8. And that intention was to bring good fortune to them. How could Joseph try to frustrate God’s plan?[[666]](#footnote-666) How could he refuse the will of God (Vg’s rendering of v. 19b)? As he spoke earlier of a big escape group, so he speaks here of a numerous people. And here as there, the brothers could think in terms of keeping alive the relatively big family that they are, but the audience would also think of making alive the really numerous people that they are soon (narratively) to become (see Exod 1:1-7)—the verb *ḥāyāh* (piel) can mean keep alive or make alive.

Thus the renewed exhortation not to be afraid (v. 21), like most occurrences in Genesis (15:1; 21:17; 26:24; 35:17; 46:3), suggests that they need not worry about the future. Joseph is going to take care of it. He had been “providing for” them and their little ones while Jacob was alive (45:11; 47:12) and he will continue to do so. Is he in the place of God? Well, in a sense, yes, given that God is the great provider (Neh 9:21; Ps 55:22 [23]). But with that commitment Joseph can be their consoler and encourager, the first two verbal expressions in Isa 40:1-2, where they too are God’s initiatives. “Since God has deposited your life with me, I should be engaged in war against him, if I were not to be the faithful dispenser of the grace which he had committed to my hands.”[[667]](#footnote-667)

**50:22-26**. It was with Joseph that the account of Jacob’s lines of descent started, and it is with Joseph that it ends.

He is apparently head of Jacob’s household (v. 22). It fits his promise to provide for the family, though perhaps his older brothers have now passed. While a number of Egyptian texts indicate that 110 years is “the ideal lifetime of the Egyptians,”[[668]](#footnote-668) The number also follows on the sequence expressed in the ages of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, since 110 is 52 + 62 + 72.[[669]](#footnote-669)

To say that his grandchildren were born on his knees (v. 23) is to say that he could treat them as his own, as his mother had treated Bilhah’s (cf. 30:3). Perhaps the idea is that they take the place of Ephraim and Manasseh, whom Jacob had adopted.

The account of Jacob’s line of descent ends with Joseph’s death (v. 24), as it started with Joseph as a youngster. In a brief alternative version of the kind of account that Genesis gave of Jacob, Genesis first tells us that Joseph knows he is about to die. But there the similarity ends. Jacob went on to express his longing to be buried back in Canaan. Joseph goes on to bring back to life God’s promise to the family as a whole, that God will come to take the family back from Egypt to the country he had sworn to give them. Here, too, the close of Genesis anticipates the future, looking beyond the exodus and claiming the promise that runs through Gen 12—50. Joseph’s talk of God “definitely attending” to the family[[670]](#footnote-670) will be vindicated by Exod 3:16 and taken up by Exod 13:19 (see also Exod 4:31); it was a fine statement of faith (Heb 11:22). This verbal expression and the one that follows, “take you up,” indicate how the verse functions to “throw a bridge across to the exodus event.”[[671]](#footnote-671) The bridging is underscored by the Scriptures’ first reference to “Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” It is also the first allusion in Part Four to God’s promise of the country of Canaan to Abraham and his descendants (48:4, 15, 16, 21 are the nearest to such references). It’s another way in which Gen 50 is preparing the way for Exodus and a return to the focus of Parts Two and Three. The entire description of the relationship between Joseph and the Egyptians will underscore the contrast when a Pharaoh arises who does not acknowledge Joseph.[[672]](#footnote-672)

Joseph himself does want to end up in the promised land (v. 25), like his father. And he does so: see Exod 13:19; Josh 24:32 (Stephen seems to get a bit confused in this connection in Acts 7:9-16). The account of Joseph’s death is a briefer and simpler account than that of Jacob. Joseph and the narrator talk straightforwardly about him dying not about him joining his ancestors and drawing in his feet, and Joseph will settle for an oath that just his bones will find their way to Canaan. He doesn’t go on about his burial and he gets a simpler interim funeral, though bones might not need to be taken too literally if Joseph was been mummified. The sons of Israel whom Joseph binds by an oath will need to be not the immediate sons of Israel but the descendants of Israel in general, who represent the people who will fulfil the promise some time later. Given that (Benjamin apart) Joseph’s actual siblings were all older than him, it is hard to imagine that they were all still alive when Joseph was dying, though Denis the Carthusian speculates that Joseph died before his brothers as a result of the spicy food and strong drink of his well-to-do Egyptian lifestyle.[[673]](#footnote-673) Thus more likely, “brothers” and “sons of Israel” in vv. 24-25 has broader reference, as back in Gen 31 “brothers” meant members of the family in a broader sense than siblings. They will be the “brothers” of Exod 2:11.

## Whereas You Intended Something Bad for Me…

The Joseph story has been called “a story of divine providence,”[[674]](#footnote-674) and etymologically it is indeed a story about God’s pro-vidence, his seeing ahead of time and his providing ahead of time—though Gen 22:14 is whereby God is more explicitly described as the one who sees to things.[[675]](#footnote-675) If God’s providence implies that God is leading history to a set goal in accordance with a plan that he formulated at the beginning, this belief is hardly justified by the story.[[676]](#footnote-676) On the other hand, Joseph does not simply mean that God saw ahead of time the decisions people would make and harnessed those decisions to his purpose, or makes even bad things work together for good (Rom 8:28), true though those formulations are in other connections. Such understandings would underestimate the implications of Joseph’s statement that God not his brothers “sent” him (45:8). Nor does Joseph declare that God decides on things and human beings cannot frustrate their fulfillment, or speak of “the overriding power of God’s rule.”[[677]](#footnote-677) Genesis does not talk about God overruling human decision-making. God did not merely permit the brothers’ action but then frustrate it. God ordained it.[[678]](#footnote-678) But nor can such formulations imply that God was like a puppet-master manipulating his brothers, or like a hypnotist causing them to do things they would not otherwise have envisaged. Nor is God using human beings in the way that I use my coffee machine, which has no will of its own and makes no decisions of its own. Such understandings would underestimate the implications of his talking of what they themselves “intended.” Indeed, “ultimately it was not the brothers' hate but God who brought Joseph to Egypt and moreover ‘to preserve life’” so that it’s half-true that “in the entire Joseph story” what is of paramount importance is “God’s hand which in all the confusion of human guilt directs everything to a gracious goal.” For all the focus on human actions in this story, “God is the real subject of the whole occurrence; God, not the brothers, ‘sent’ Joseph here.”[[679]](#footnote-679) But they “intended” it, too.

The taking of Joseph to Egypt was brought about by God and by his brothers. How is one event brought about by two agents? Genesis has given many examples of how the decision-making and action of God and of human beings interact. In one sense there may be nothing mysterious about it.[[680]](#footnote-680)

Sometimes human being make decisions and take initiatives to which God responds. For instance:

1. Human beings may do things to which God responds by doing something that he seems not to have originally intended (Gen 16—17).
2. God may formulate an intention, then check out what human beings are doing before implementing it (Gen 18—19).
3. Human beings may do something on their own initiative that conforms to God’s general purpose to which God responds by making sure it works out well (Gen 24).
4. Human beings may do something that has different results from the ones the actors had in mind. Pharaoh was concerned to see that his people got fed; he accidentally made it possible for Joseph and his brothers to reconcile.
5. Human beings may make plans that fail because God wants something else to happen (Gen 14:1-16; cf. Prov 19:21; 20:24).[[681]](#footnote-681)

In Genesis such events are set in the framework of God’s taking initiatives, though those initiatives do require a human response. For instance:

1. God commissions human beings to rule the earth on his behalf, but their response is at best mixed and the result is a situation in which things don’t work out as God would have wished.
2. God gives Noah and Abraham commissions (Gen 6:13—7:16; 12:1-4). If they had declined to do as God said, perhaps God would have commissioned someone else. But the Scriptures give a number of examples of God refusing to take no for an answer (Moses, Jonah, Jeremiah).
3. God’s envoy appears to Hagar to send her back to Abraham and Sarah and to save her life (Gen 16; 21).
4. God appears to Abimelek to warn him off from a relationship with Sarah (Gen 21).
5. God sends Pharaoh dreams to reveal what is to happen by way of flourishing and famine (Gen 41:25, 28).

But there are yet other events where God does something that involves human beings without their being aware of it or that involve working through natural processes. For instance:

1. God was with Joseph and what he did succeeded (Gen 39:21, 23)
2. God inspired favor towards Joseph in the eyes of his jailer (Gen 39:21).
3. God causes the flourishing and the famine in Egypt (Gen 41:25, 28, 32).
4. God enabled Joseph to forget the past and to be fruitful in Egypt (Gen 41:51-52).
5. God made Joseph a “father” to Pharaoh and someone with power in Egypt (Gen 45:8).

So it wasn’t they who sent him there but God (Gen 45:8), even though they did the selling (45:5).

Genesis does not always comment on how God’s acts and human acts work together. What was the status and interrelationship of Joseph’s bringing bad reports to his father, Jacob’s favoritism, and his brothers’ jealousy? What was the relationship between Joseph’s dreams and the events that follow? The dreams hang over the story in Gen 37—44. Perhaps Joseph knew how things had to work out, though he apparently he didn’t know how they would do so. It is possible to affirm the conviction expressed in 45:8 but it is likely impossible to know how God’s purpose and human purposes will interrelate. Joseph perhaps knew that God had sent him to Egypt, though this awareness does not surface for a while. Indeed, his naming of his sons (41:51-52) rather implies that he had given up on the dreams until his brothers arrive and he thinks about them again (42:9). He then didn’t leave it to God to make things work out, yet he perhaps recognized that things could not work out without God. The brothers’ attempts to frustrate the dreams bring about their fulfillment. Joseph’s attempts to bring about their fulfillment (in a way that also brings about transformation in the brothers) succeed.

Genesis assumes that it is possible for human beings to make their own decisions about doing things and to do them and for these acts to be also God’s acts with a different and even prior aim; it does not seek to explain how this works. God inspired the human decision. While it was their decision, Joseph is more interested in the fact that before it was their decision, it was God’s decision. God sent Joseph. He gave Joseph the dream which revealed what was going to happen and thereby caused it to happen as Joseph’s reporting it to his brothers understandably antagonized them and stimulated their (freely) deciding to take action designed to frustrate it that actually facilitated is fulfillment, to their great advantage. This instance of the way God sometimes works finds its ultimate parallel in what God does through Jesus as he formulates his plan beforehand but it is put into effect through human wrongdoing.[[682]](#footnote-682) It was “by the defined plan and foreknowledge of God” that Jesus was handed over, crucified, and killed “by the hand of lawless people” (Acts 2:23). Judas, and the religious and political authorities were the means of God’s purpose being put into effect. God knew what he wanted to achieve; they took action that they wanted to take for their own reasons that contrasted with what God wanted, and unwittingly they brought about what God wanted, for their own benefit.

While Exod 4—14 will talk about Yahweh hardening hearts and about Pharaoh hardening his own heart, Ezek 18:31 and 36:26 will talk about making oneself a new heart and about Yahweh giving people a new, soft heart. There is no transforming of a person such as Judah without God being involved and without Judah being involved.

Christian theology has traditionally affirmed that God is one, is omnipresent, is hidden, is invisible, is omnipotent, is omniscient, and expresses these characteristics in love.[[683]](#footnote-683) The story in Genesis 37—50 embodies these convictions.

1. Cf. R. J. Clifford, “Genesis 37—50,” in Evans et al. (eds.), *Book of Genesis*, 213-29. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 37—50*, 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cf. Reno, *Genesis*, 271. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Coats, *Genesis*, 259. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Cf. Qimchi, *Genesis* on 37:3 (though Qimchi notes the positive point in his comment on 37:13). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Cf. [F. R. Somerset] Lord Raglan, “The Hero of Tradition,” in Dundes (ed.), *Study of Folklore*, 142-57 (149). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. So von Rad, *Genesis*, 428. It is common to use the Latin-looking word “novella” (e.g., Humphreys, *Joseph*). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 382. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Redford, *Study of the Biblical Story of Joseph*, 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See e.g., F. W. Golka, “Genesis 37—50,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 2 (2004): 153-77; F. Ede, *Die Josefsgeschichte* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. In vv. 24-25, at least, Anah must be a man; SP, LXX thus have “son of.” MT implies that “daughter of” is a further description of Oholibamah and means more precisely “granddaughter of” (cf. Wenham, *Genesis 16—50*, 337). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See the footnote to 31:23. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. SP, LXX have “son of”: see the footnote to v. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *’Allûp* comes from *’elep*, the word for a thousand. In Exod 15:15; Zech 12:5-6 (and cf. Zech 9:7) it means “chief,” someone who was etymologically or nominally commander of a thousand, and LXX, Vg, Tg assume this meaning here, but it fits poorly in the context. I take it here and in 1 Chron 1 (the vast majority of the occurrences) to mean (nominally or etymologically) “a group of a thousand” (so e.g., Seebass, *Genesis* 2/2:463). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. I follow Vg for the translation of the hapax *yēmim*. According to Jerome (*Hebrew Questions on Genesis*, 74), the translation is based on the word’s meaning in Carthaginian, which was a Semitic language; the idea that there were hot springs in the region (especially near the Dead Sea) is entirely plausible (Driver, *Genesis*, 316), though Hayward is doubtful about Jerome’s comment (*Hebrew Questions on Genesis*, 217-18). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. SP and 1 Chron 1:50 have Hadad, LXX has Arad by metathesis. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Luther, *Genesis 31—37*, 284. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. J. R. Bartlett, “The Land of Seir and the Brotherhood of Edom,” *JTS* 20 (1969): 1-20; cf. Westermann, *Genesis 12—36*, 562. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 12—36*, 561. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Coats, *Genesis*, 246, 247. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. E. Blum, “The Jacob Tradtion,” in Evans et al. (eds.), *Book of Genesis*, 181-211 (186). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Brayford, *Genesis*, 386. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 247. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Cf. Schneider, *Mothers of Promise*, 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Cf. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 377. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Cf. Qimchi, *Genesis*, on v. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Cf. Assis, *Identity in Conflict*, 59-60. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. *CD* II, 2:217. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. KSG. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Cf. von Rad, *Genesis*, 341. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Cf. Alter, *Genesis*, 205. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 12—36*, 565. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. While *dābāh* always has negative implications, to make this connotation explicit it can be qualified by *rā‘āh* (cf. Num 14:37). There are no clear examples of its denoting a true report. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Tg has varying versions arising from the fact that this description applies more naturally to Benjamin: see the comment. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. I take the *weqatal* form to continue the circumstantial clause rather than as indicating that Jacob made these coats often (GK 112h). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. See Speiser, *Genesis*, 289-90. For *passîm* (which comes only in this chapter and in 2 Sam 13:18, 19), LXX, Vg have “multicolored,” Aq “ankle-length,” Sym “long-sleeved.” *Pas* means “palm” or “sole,” which might suggest either of the last two. See further Tal, *Genesis*, 168\*. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Literally, “speak [of] him regarding *šālōm*.” For *dabbᵉrô*, LXX, Vg have “speak to him,” Tg “with him,” but this use of *dibber* with a direct object would be “strange” (GK 115c), and unique or virtually unique (see BDB 181a). Following on their understanding of *dabbᵉrô*, LXX, Vg take *lᵉšālōm* to mean “peaceably,” but even on that understanding of *dabbᵉrô* it could as easily mean “regarding *šālōm*,” and “regarding *šālōm*” is more likely if *dabbᵉrô* means “speak of him.” [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. LXX omits the last clause, perhaps not recognizing that it is an anticipatory summary (cf. B. Becking, “‘They Hated Him Even More,” *BN* 60 [1991]: 40-47). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. MT’s accents make these two verbs qatal, but following the participle “binding” and the yiqtol “gather” I take them as participles, like the verb in v. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Twice, the verb is preceded by the infinitive of the same root, adding emphasis; vv. 11 and 33 have further occurrences of the idiom. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. The plural might be anticipatory, as vv. 9-10 will tell of another dream; dreams come in twos in Gen 37--50. And/or it might be pejorative (“him and his dreams!”). But the plural recurs in Dan 2:2 as plural of extension, suggesting the parts of the one dream (cf. GKC 124), or abstract plural (Seebass, *Genesis* 3:18). [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Consonantally, the name is *dtyn* the first time (also with the locative ending), *dtn* the second time; the first is perhaps the original form, the latter a simplified Hebraized version (see Skinner, *Genesis*, 446). [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. For the hitpael with direct object, see 34:9 and the note. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Literally, “bad”; so also in v. 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Literally, “We will not strike him [as to] his life.” The negative *lō’* (not *’al*) suggests that *nakkennû* is to be taken as yiqtol rather than cohortative; and see the footnote to 28:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Literally “to eat bread.” [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. What is the relationship of “Midyanites” and “Yišma’elites” and who is the subject of the verbs in v. 28? I take “Midyanites” as a subset of “Yišma’elites,” and the brothers as the ones who pull up, get up, and sell Joseph; rather than the Midianites being a different group, and they being the ones who pull up, get up, and sell. See the comment. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Literally, “come.” [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Literally, “on his hips.” [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. What daughters? TgPsJ assumes they are his daughters-in-law, and “daughters” could include “daughters-in-law,” while *Jub* 34:16 corrects to “daughter” (i.e., Dinah). But the odds are huge against Jacob having twelve sons but only one daughter, and 47:7 will refer to his daughters, of whom the plot has not required previous mention. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. *Midyānîm* and *mᵉdānîm* are variant ways of spelling a word for “arguments” (Prov 6:19; 10:12; 18:8); the same is apparently true of the homonyms for this ethnic group. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Cf. Tg; LXX, Vg have “eunuch,” which could provide background to his wife’s fancying Joseph (Brayford, *Genesis*, 398), but this is likely a later meaning of *sārîs* (see *HALOT*; Redford, *Study of the Biblical Story of Joseph*, 51). [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. The etymology of *ṭabāḥ* supports LXX “chief butcher,” TgOnq “head of the killers,” but OT usage (e.g., Jer 39:9) suggests that its meaning has become watered down (cf. Vg). [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Sarna, *Genesis*, 254. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. B. J. Schwartz gives a detailed analysis in “How the Compiler of Genesis Worked,” in Evans et al. (eds.), *Book of Genesis*, 263-78; but see the critique in F. Watson, *Text, Church and World* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1994), 46-59. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. So Frankel, *Five Books of Miriam*, 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. So R. Pirson, “What Is Joseph Supposed to Be?” in A. Brenner and J. W. van Henten (eds.), *Recycling Biblical Figures* (Leiden: Deo, 1999), 81-92. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Cf. Qimchi, *Genesis*, on v. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Willet, *Hexapla in Genesin & Exodum*, 325: the expression means variegated, but the resonances in modern English are noteworthy. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 390. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Westermann, *Genesis 37—*50, 37. On the antonymous verbs, see the comment on 29:31. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Redford, *Study of the Biblical Story of Joseph*, 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 300, referring to R. D. Laing, *The Politics of the Family and Other Essays* (reprinted New York: Pantheon, 1971). [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Cf. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 301. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Von Rad, *Genesis,* 346. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. *Antiquities* II, 2:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Westermann, *Genesis 37—*50, 38; Westermann also describes the brothers as “testy.” [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Cf. Piraon, *Lord of the Dreams,* 47-50. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Cf. Qimchi, *Genesis*, on v. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Brayford, *Genesis*, 391. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Cf. Qimchi, *Genesis*, on v. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Cf. Skinner, *Genesis*, 446. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Cf. Luther, *Genesis 31—37*, 350, 351. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Driver, *Genesis*, 323. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 254. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Brayford, *Genesis*, 392. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Alter, *Genesis*, 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Seebass, *Genesis* 3:28. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. KSG. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. See the comment there. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. So Hamilton, *Genesis 18—50*, 423. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Cf. also Josephus, *Antiquities* II, 3:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. So e.g., Peter Comestor, *Scholastic History* 82, as quoted by Schroeder, *Genesis*, 182. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 394. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 383. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 394. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 350. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Luther, *Genesis 31—37*, 386. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 394. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 298. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Cf. Reno, *Genesis*, 264-65. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Y. T. Radday, “Humour in Names,” in Y. T. Radday and A. Brenner (eds.), *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Almond, 1990), 59-97 (69-70). [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. See the translation note. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. So Hammurabi’s Code 14 (*ANET*, 166). [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. See Sarna, *Genesis*, 261. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. See further V. H. Matthews, “The Anthropology of Clothing in the Joseph Narrative,” *JSOT 65* (1995): 25-36; J. R. Huddlestun, “Divestiture, Deception, and Demotion,” *JSOT* 98 (2002): 47-62; K. M. Heffelfinger, “From Bane to Blessing,” *JSOT* 40 (2016): 297-321; S. B. Chapman, “Food, Famine, and the Nations,” in MacDonald et al. (eds.), *Genesis and Christian Theology*, 323-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. A number of versions of Tg take *kᵉna‘ănî* to mean “merchant,” as it sometimes does, which avoids attributing such a questionable marriage to the ancestor of the clan of Judah. TgPsJ doubly safeguards against the idea that Judah married a Canaanite by also telling us that Judah converted Shua’s daughter not that he married her. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. LXX takes Ṧua‘ to be the woman’s name. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. Literally, “came into”; so also in vv. 8, 9, 16, 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. SP, some medieval mss, and TgPsJ have “she named him,” assimilating to v. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. LXX “She was” implies *wᵉhî’* for MT *wᵉhāyāh*. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. LXX, Vg “his shepherd” presuppose *rō‘ēhû* for MT *rē‘ēhû* (so also v. 20). [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. To speak of a town’s entrance is slightly odd (though cf. 1 Kings 17:10), and Vg, TgOnq, TgPsJ take *petaḥ* to mean crossroads (in English one could say that Judah is indeed coming to a crossroads). In addition, the place name ‘ênayim is otherwise unknown; it could mean “springs,” which would be a plausible place name. But the description of the location makes for a double entendre (Hamilton, *Genesis 18—50*, 440, and his references) since “the entrance to Enayim” could also mean “the opening of eyes” (see the comment). It will also be for this reason that Enam (Josh 15:34) is here called Enayim (cf. J. W. H. Bos, “An Eyeopener at the Gate,” *LTQ* 27 [1992]:119-23). [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. I take the masculine *hû’* as predicative (see Tal, 171\*). [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. Such a confession might seem an understatement (cf. A. Jeremiah, “Reclaiming ‘Her’ Right,” *Bangalore Theological Forum* 38 [2006]: 145-56 [147]) and the implication may be “she is the faithful one, not me” (cf. 1 Sam 24:17 [18]; see *IBHS* 14.4e; and the footnote to 29:20). But usually *min* denotes comparison rather than absolute contrast (see *DCH*; GK 133b). [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. Whereas vv. 1-9, 16, 18 use the expression *bô’ ’el* (“come into”) to signify having sex, v. 26 uses the verb *yāda‘* (“know/acknowledge”). [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. While Judah might be the subject of the singular verb, it is some time since he was mentioned, and elsewhere this verbal expression is impersonal (cf. 11:9; 16:14; 19:22; 25:30; 27:36; 33:17; 50:11). SP, TgPsJ have “she named,” and LXX implies this understanding. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. “Breakout.” [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. “Shining” (though Genesis does not note this name’s meaning). [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. Kidner, *Genesis*, 187. See further A. I. Abasili, “Genesis 38,” *SJOT* 25 (2011): 276-88. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. Cf. Brett, *Genesis*, 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. Cf. Fretheim, “Genesis,” 592; R. J. Clifford, “Genesis 38,” *CBQ* 66 (2004): 519-32. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. Redford, *Study of the Biblical Story of Joseph*, 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. See J. Kruschwitz, “The Type-Scene Connection between Genesis 38 and the Joseph Story,” *JSOT* 36 (2012): 383-410. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. See e.g. J. P. Fokkelman, “”Genesis 37 and 38,” in L. J. de Regt et al. (eds.), *Literary Structure ad Rhetorical Strategies in the Hebrew Bible* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1996), 152-87. [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. Cf. Wenham, *Genesis 16—50*, 366. [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. Cf. Jerome, *Hebrew Questions on Genesis*, 76-77; compare the footnote on Enayim in v. 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. *Jub* 41:1-3 has Er refusing to have sex with Tamar because she was an Aramean whereas Er’s mother was a Canaanite. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. Cf. Brett, *Genesis*, 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. Van Dijk-Hemmes, *The Double Voice of Her Desire*, 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
121. Cf. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 399. [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
122. See the footnote at 26:25. [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
123. L. C. Siwila, “From a Father-in-law to a Client,” *JTSA* 154 (2016): 141-55 (148). [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
124. See F. van Dijk-Hemmes, “Tamar and the Limits of Patriarchy,” in M. Bal (ed.), *Anti-Covenant* (Sheffield: Almond, 1989), 135-56 (150). On the positive picture of Tamar in Jewish interpretation, see S. C. Reif, “Early Rabbinic Exegesis of Genesis 38,” in E. Grypeou and H. Spurling (eds.), *The Exegetical Encounter Between Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, 2009),221-43 (231-32). [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
125. Cf. Jacobs, *Gender, Power, and Persuasion*, 189-92. [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
126. See C. Garcia Alfonso, “El silencio del cuerpo,” *Apuntes* 19/3 (1999): 80-83. [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
127. M. Lewis, “‘You Have to Stand on Crooked and Cut Straight,’” in P. Sheerattan-Bisnauth (ed.), *Righting Her Story* (Geneva: WCRC, 2011), 13-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
128. See paragraph 40 in the Middle Assyrian Laws (from a little later than the setting of the Joseph story) in *ANET*,180-88 (183); cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 268. [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
129. See the footnote. [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
130. But contrast the critique of Judah in *Jub* 41:23-26 and the warning about following his example. [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
131. See paragraph 193 in the mid-second millennium Hittite laws, in *ANET*, 188-97 (196); cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 266. [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
132. KSG. [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
133. Frankel, *Five Books of Miriam*, 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
134. *Hitstories* I, 195:2 (cf. Skinner, *Genesis*, 454. [↑](#footnote-ref-134)
135. Hamilton, *Genesis 18—50*, 446. [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
136. See the comment. [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
137. See J. DeGrado, “The *qdesha* in Hosea 4:14,” *VT* 68 (2018): 8-40, and the references in the article. [↑](#footnote-ref-137)
138. See *ANET*, 172. [↑](#footnote-ref-138)
139. Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
140. Cf. Kidner, *Genesis*, 189. [↑](#footnote-ref-140)
141. This declaration is the starting point for E. Blachman’s study *The Transformation of Tamar (Genesis 38) in the History of Jewish Interpretation* (Leuven: Peeters, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-141)
142. Adelman, *Female Ruse*, 5; cf. 68-89. [↑](#footnote-ref-142)
143. See D. Kim, “The Structure of Genesis 38,” *VT* 62 (2012): 550-60 (554). [↑](#footnote-ref-143)
144. Cf. D.-W. Lim, “A Study on the Re - canonicity of Genesis Chapter 38,” *Korea Journal of Christian Studies* 36 (2004): 5-20 (14). [↑](#footnote-ref-144)
145. Cf. Luther, *Genesis 38—44*, 47-48. [↑](#footnote-ref-145)
146. Luther, *Genesis 38—44*, 10-11, 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-146)
147. But on actual Jewish interpretation of the story, see S. C. Reif, “Early Rabbinic Exegesis of Genesis 38,” in Grypeou/Spurling (eds.), *The Exegetical Encounter Between Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity*, 221-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-147)
148. Cf. Calvin, *Genesis* 2:277-78. [↑](#footnote-ref-148)
149. Wickes, “Ephrem’s Interpretation of Genesis,” 60. Cf. also Chrysostom’s comments, *Homilies on Genesis 46-67*, 199-200. [↑](#footnote-ref-149)
150. Reno, *Genesis*, 267. [↑](#footnote-ref-150)
151. V. 2 used the hiphil of *ṣālaḥ* in a declarative sense; vv. 3 and 23 use it in a causative sense. [↑](#footnote-ref-151)
152. See the footnote to 22:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-152)
153. Potiphar’s wife uses the lengthened form of the imperative here and in v. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-153)
154. Vg has “my God.” [↑](#footnote-ref-154)
155. That is, this particular day that we are now to hear about. The construction at the beginning of v. 11 compares and contrasts with that in v. 10: both begin *wayᵉhî kᵉ*. The construction recurs in vv. 13, 15, 18, 19. The unusual non-elision of the article in the expression *kᵉhayyôm* clarifies the significance of the *kᵉ*. [↑](#footnote-ref-155)
156. Genesis uses the imperative verb rather than the particle *hinnēh*, suggesting that she is urging people actually to look at the garment. [↑](#footnote-ref-156)
157. In 38:8-9 and elsewhere the Hebrew expression is a term for having sex, and the context will hints at this connotation here and in v. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-157)
158. Vg makes explicit that he listened too well. [↑](#footnote-ref-158)
159. LXX translates “fortification,” which no doubt it was. [↑](#footnote-ref-159)
160. Cf. Coats, *Genesis*, 276-81. [↑](#footnote-ref-160)
161. See H. C. P. Kim, “Reading the Joseph Story (Genesis 37—50) as a Diaspora Narrative,” *CBQ* 75 (2013): 219-38. [↑](#footnote-ref-161)
162. Cf. Skinner, *Genesis*, 457. [↑](#footnote-ref-162)
163. Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 37—50*, 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-163)
164. Cf. Ephrem, “Genesis,” 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-164)
165. Cf. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 314-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-165)
166. See e.g., the late medieval midrash *Sefer HaYashar* on the passage: (trans. *The Book of Jasher* (New York: Noah, 1840),140.. [↑](#footnote-ref-166)
167. Cf. Luther, *Genesis 38—44*, 75-86. [↑](#footnote-ref-167)
168. So S. Niditch, in Eskenazi/Weiss (eds.), *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*, 226. [↑](#footnote-ref-168)
169. Cf. H. A. McKay, “Confronting Redundancy as Middle Manager and Wife,” *Semeia* 37 (1999): 215-31 (218). [↑](#footnote-ref-169)
170. KSG. [↑](#footnote-ref-170)
171. Cf. Brett, *Genesis*, 115-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-171)
172. Cf. Chromatius of Aquileia, “Incipit de sancto patriarcha Ioseph” 2, in *Opera* (Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 9A; Turnhout: Brephols, 1974), 108 (cf. Sheridan [ed.], *Genesis 12—50*, 250). [↑](#footnote-ref-172)
173. Cf. Reno, *Genesis*, 268. [↑](#footnote-ref-173)
174. So S. Bakon, “Subtleties in the Story of Joseph and Potiphar's Wife,” *JBQ* 41 (2013): 171-74 (171-72). [↑](#footnote-ref-174)
175. See *ANET*, 23-25 (24). [↑](#footnote-ref-175)
176. Cf. Ibn Ezra, *Genesis*,362. [↑](#footnote-ref-176)
177. Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 424. [↑](#footnote-ref-177)
178. See the comment there. [↑](#footnote-ref-178)
179. See M. Sternberg, *Hebrews Between Cultures* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-179)
180. They are the first of the story’s “narrative techniques” discussed in Humphreys, *Joseph*, 93-99. [↑](#footnote-ref-180)
181. Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-181)
182. Cf. Skinner, *Genesis*, 458-59. [↑](#footnote-ref-182)
183. So Sarna, *Genesis*, 275. [↑](#footnote-ref-183)
184. *Historical Library* I, 78:4 (cf. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 409). [↑](#footnote-ref-184)
185. See C. J. Eyre, “Crime and Adultery in Ancient Egypt,” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 70 (1984): 92-105. [↑](#footnote-ref-185)
186. Cf. TgPsJ; Ibn Ezra, *Genesis*,363. [↑](#footnote-ref-186)
187. Cf. von Rad, *Genesis*, 362. [↑](#footnote-ref-187)
188. Westermann, *Genesis 37—50*, 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-188)
189. Calvin, *Genesis* 2:260. [↑](#footnote-ref-189)
190. See further Keil/Delitzsch, *Pentateuch*, 330-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-190)
191. See further the section on “Whereas You Intended Something Bad for Me…” at the end of the commentary on 49:28—50:26. [↑](#footnote-ref-191)
192. Literally, “gave his favor”: a genitive of advantage. [↑](#footnote-ref-192)
193. See the footnote to 22:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-193)
194. On the unusual use of *kî ’im*, see GK 163cd, which also notes that *kî ’im* commonly leads into a qatal—as in 32:27. [↑](#footnote-ref-194)
195. Conventionally, one would translate “make mention of me to Pharaoh,” but Joseph is repeating the verb *zākar* which he earlier used in the qal and here uses in the hiphil. [↑](#footnote-ref-195)
196. The verb is preceded by the infinitive of the same root, adding emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-196)
197. For the hapax *ḥōrî*,the root *ḥûr* suggest something white, but “white bread” (BDB, *DCH*) seems misleading since v. 17 refers to all kinds of baked goods; though LXX, Vg imply ordinary bread;. [↑](#footnote-ref-197)
198. Dillmann, *Genesis* 2:359. [↑](#footnote-ref-198)
199. Hamilton, *Genesis 18—50*, 471. [↑](#footnote-ref-199)
200. Luther, *Genesis 38—44*, 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-200)
201. Cf. Seebass, *Genesis* 3:52. [↑](#footnote-ref-201)
202. Calvin, *Genesis* 2:305. [↑](#footnote-ref-202)
203. Cf. Brayford, *Genesis*, 403. [↑](#footnote-ref-203)
204. Luther, *Genesis 38—44*, 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-204)
205. Literally each time “and it happened after these things”—though “after” is *’aḥar* in 39:7, *’aḥarê* here. [↑](#footnote-ref-205)
206. See the footnote there. [↑](#footnote-ref-206)
207. Cf. Alter, *Genesis*, 229. [↑](#footnote-ref-207)
208. Cf. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 412. [↑](#footnote-ref-208)
209. See e.g., *DCH* on *pātar* and *pešer* and related words. [↑](#footnote-ref-209)
210. See e.g., K. M. Szpakowska, *Behind Closed Eyes: Dreams and Nightmares in Ancient Egypt* (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-210)
211. See further J. Goldingay, *Daniel* (revised ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-211)
212. M. V. Fox, “Joseph and Wisdom,” in Evans et al. (eds.), *Book of Genesis*, 231-62 (245). [↑](#footnote-ref-212)
213. Cf. von Rad, *Genesis*, 366. [↑](#footnote-ref-213)
214. See *DCH* 5:760. [↑](#footnote-ref-214)
215. Cf. Fretheim, “Genesis,” 616. [↑](#footnote-ref-215)
216. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 324-25. [↑](#footnote-ref-216)
217. So J. Vergote, *Joseph en Égypte* (Louvain, Publications Universitaires, 1959), 37; cf. Wenham, *Genesis 16—50*, 384. [↑](#footnote-ref-217)
218. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 413. [↑](#footnote-ref-218)
219. De La Torre, *Genesis*, 326. [↑](#footnote-ref-219)
220. Literally, “two years days.” [↑](#footnote-ref-220)
221. A Hebrew adaptation of the Egyptian term for the Nile; the latter name is an adaptation of a Greek term of unknown origin. [↑](#footnote-ref-221)
222. *’Āḥû* is one of several Egyptian words in Gen 41, along with *ḥarṭumîm* “diviners” and *šēš* “linen,” the possibly puzzling word *’abrēk* in v. 43, and the several names, which give local color to the story (Alter, *Genesis*, 234). [↑](#footnote-ref-222)
223. Vg nicely calls them conjecturers (*coniectores*). [↑](#footnote-ref-223)
224. The familiar Hebrew word *ḥākām* explains the Egyptian word *ḥarṭōm*. [↑](#footnote-ref-224)
225. Conventionally, the hiphil of *zākar* translates as “make mention of,” and the verb can denote the giving of evidence in court—so that the butler implies he is testifying against himself (von Rad, *Genesis*, 370-71).But he is picking up the verb from Joseph’s words to him in 40:14 (see the footnote). [↑](#footnote-ref-225)
226. The head butler continues to speak deferentially to Pharaoh in the third person; Pharaoh himself is the “he.” [↑](#footnote-ref-226)
227. On this rare emphatic expression, see the footnote to 14:24. [↑](#footnote-ref-227)
228. On this translation of *‘ānāh*, see the footnote to 18:27. [↑](#footnote-ref-228)
229. Pharaoh switches from *daq* (thin) to *raq* (skinny); the two words similar in meaning are even more similar in appearance in Hebrew than in English (because d and r look similar). Thus (e.g.) SP had *raq* in v. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-229)
230. The four occurrences of *’ĕlōhîm* on Joseph’s lips in vv. 25-32 have the article, perhaps implying “the real God” (cf. Arnold, *Genesis*, 341). [↑](#footnote-ref-230)
231. To make the linguistic links even more subtle (see the footnote to v. 19), “empty” is *rēq*; in meaning it also contrasts with “full” in v. 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-231)
232. The declarative/performative qatal suggests a speech act, “I hereby put.” [↑](#footnote-ref-232)
233. For “acquire a fifth of” TgOnq has “equip” (BDB’s *ḥmš* IV). [↑](#footnote-ref-233)
234. A third expression from the root *pāqad* (see v. 34), “one of the most elegant words in the Hebrew language” (Luther, Genesis, 38—44*,* 157); cf. the varied occurrences in 21:1; 39:5; 40:4, 5; 50:24, 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-234)
235. Cf. LXX, Vg for the translation of this verb, which I take as *DCH*’s *nāšaq* III as in Ps 2:12. [↑](#footnote-ref-235)
236. The declarative/performative qatal suggests a speech act, “I hereby declare”; there is another example in v. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-236)
237. Alter (*Genesis*, 240) notes that Egyptian bas-reliefs portray people wearing a collar incorporating gold wire. [↑](#footnote-ref-237)
238. The meaning of *’abrēk* has to be guessed from the context, but a Hebrew speaker would plausibly link it with *bārak* “kneel” (cf. Aq, Vg), and might not be mistaken (see Redford, *Study of the Biblical Story of Joseph*, 224-26). LXX has “herald”: see C. Stadel, “A Septuagint Translation Tradition and the *Samaritan Targum* to Genesis 41:43,” *JBL* 131 (2012): 705-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-238)
239. The infinitive absolute takes the place of a finite verb. [↑](#footnote-ref-239)
240. Tg makes Joseph’s father-in-law ruler rather than priest. [↑](#footnote-ref-240)
241. In light of what precedes, on might translate *yāṣā’* “arose” (cf. the literal use in 19:23); but in light of the recurrence of the verb in v. 46, more likely it has the literal meaning. [↑](#footnote-ref-241)
242. “They stored up fist over fist, hand over hand” (Rashi, *Br’šyt*, 465). [↑](#footnote-ref-242)
243. Genesis introduces its third word for wheat or grain. In vv. 5-7, 22-27 it used the word *šibbōlet* which refers to ears of wheat as they grow. In vv. 35, 49 it used the word *bar* which strictly denotes grains of wheat when they have been harvested. In vv. 56-57 it uses the verb *šābar*, a denominative verb from *šeber* which denotes trading in grain. Elsewhere the qal denotes buying and the hiphil selling, but here in vv. 56-57 MT uses the qal with both meanings. [↑](#footnote-ref-243)
244. Sarna, *Genesis*, 280. [↑](#footnote-ref-244)
245. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 415. [↑](#footnote-ref-245)
246. See the footnote to v. 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-246)
247. Calvin, *Genesis* 2:318. [↑](#footnote-ref-247)
248. De La Torre, *Genesis,* 326. [↑](#footnote-ref-248)
249. See *ANET*, 76-77 (cf. Hamilton, *Genesis 18—50*, 487-88). [↑](#footnote-ref-249)
250. Cf. Wenham, *Genesis 16—50*,391. [↑](#footnote-ref-250)
251. See the comment on 40:4b-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-251)
252. Luther, *Genesis 38—44*, 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-252)
253. Cf. Driver, *Genesis*, 339. [↑](#footnote-ref-253)
254. M. Baumgarten, *Theologischer Commentar zum Pentateuch* (Kiel: Universitäts, 1843) 1:325 (cf. Keil/ Delitzsch, *Pentateuch*, 349). [↑](#footnote-ref-254)
255. Qimchi, *Genesis*, on 41:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-255)
256. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 326. [↑](#footnote-ref-256)
257. Cf. Rashi, *Br’šyt*, 455. [↑](#footnote-ref-257)
258. Luther, *Genesis 38—44*, 156. [↑](#footnote-ref-258)
259. Cf. Luther, *Genesis 38—44*, 148-49. [↑](#footnote-ref-259)
260. Herodotus, *Histories* 2:5; cf. Seebass, *Genesis* 3:66. [↑](#footnote-ref-260)
261. See the inscription quoted in *ANET*, 31-32, with the heading “The Tradition of Seven Lean Years in Egypt” (and further, Hamilton, *Genesis 18—50*, 497). [↑](#footnote-ref-261)
262. See e.g., *The Book of the Dead* as translated by T. G. Allen (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1974), 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-262)
263. See Sarna, *Genesis*, 290. [↑](#footnote-ref-263)
264. Cf. Driver, *Genesis*, 346-47. [↑](#footnote-ref-264)
265. Cf. Arnold, *Genesis*, 342. [↑](#footnote-ref-265)
266. Cf. Hamilton, *Genesis 18—50*, 499. [↑](#footnote-ref-266)
267. Cf. W. A. Ward, “The Egyptian Office of Joseph,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 5 (1960): 144-50. [↑](#footnote-ref-267)
268. See e.g., Sarna, *Genesis*, 288. [↑](#footnote-ref-268)
269. Cf. Alter, *Genesis*, 240. [↑](#footnote-ref-269)
270. Cf. Skinner, *Genesis*, 469. [↑](#footnote-ref-270)
271. Seebass, *Genesis* 3:71. [↑](#footnote-ref-271)
272. Cf. G. J. Wenham, “The Religion of the Patriarchs,” in A. R. Millard and D. J. Wiseman (eds.), *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives* (Leicester, UK: IVP, 1980), 157-88 (184). [↑](#footnote-ref-272)
273. See BDB*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-273)
274. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 372. [↑](#footnote-ref-274)
275. Cf. Driver, *Genesis*, 343. [↑](#footnote-ref-275)
276. De la Torre, *Genesis*, 327; cf. Brett, *Genesis*, 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-276)
277. Cf. Qimchi, *Genesis*, on vv. 35-36. [↑](#footnote-ref-277)
278. Fretheim, “Genesis,” 624. [↑](#footnote-ref-278)
279. Cf. Wenham, *Genesis 16—50*, 397-98. [↑](#footnote-ref-279)
280. The subject rather than the verb comes first in v. 57, which is thus a similar circumstantial clause to 43:1; both give background information to what follows. I thus associate 41:57 (which changes the subject over against what precedes) with 42:1-38, against the medieval chapter division. [↑](#footnote-ref-280)
281. Literally, “saw that”; the translation reflects the link with the recurrence of the verb in v. 1b. [↑](#footnote-ref-281)
282. TgPsJ has “why are you afraid,” implying a form from *yārē’* rather than *rā’āh;* cf. Jerome*, Hebrew Questions on Genesis,* 188-89. LXX “why are you taking things easy,” Vg “why are you neglectful” convey the implication—as indeed may TgPsJ. [↑](#footnote-ref-282)
283. For the translation of the circumstantial clause, see S. A. Geller, “Cleft Sentences with Pleonastic pronoun,” *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 20 (1991): 15-33 (26-27). [↑](#footnote-ref-283)
284. *BDB*, *DCH*, and B. Lang in *TDOT* 9:423-31 derive the two forms of *nākar* from separate roots, one meaning “recognize” and one meaning “be foreign.” *HALOT* takes them as antithetical meanings from the same root. Either way, the juxtaposition has the effect of paronomasia: he recognized, but he acted so as not be recognized, or he knew they were not foreigners but he acted as if they were. The point is underscored by the double recurrence of the verb in v. 8. It also makes a link with 37:32-33 (and 38:25-26). [↑](#footnote-ref-284)
285. Etymologically, people “going about on foot.” [↑](#footnote-ref-285)
286. TgOnq has “defects/breaches,” Vg “weaknesses,” LXX “tracks,” Sym “secrets,” TgNeoph “entrances,” TgPsJ the bareness of the whores.” The word order highlights the nature of the accusation (Bandstra, “Word Order and Emphasis,” 121). [↑](#footnote-ref-286)
287. LXX “peaceable” sacrifices the irony in their claim. [↑](#footnote-ref-287)
288. LXX, Vg “another” imply *’aḥēr* for *’aḥad*. [↑](#footnote-ref-288)
289. TgNeoph, TgPsJ “one left us, and we do not know what became of him in the end" perhaps lets them off the hook. [↑](#footnote-ref-289)
290. Vg has “by Pharaoh’s life,” which makes good sense of the asyndetic expression, on which see JM 165e; *IBHS* 40.2.2b. [↑](#footnote-ref-290)
291. LXX sees the *’ăšer* at the beginning of this clause as a rare causal use of the conjunction; Vg sees it as referring back to the suffix on “our brother”; I take it as referring forward to the suffix on *napšô*—literally, “brother, the distress of whose spirit we saw.” [↑](#footnote-ref-291)
292. On this translation of *‘ānāh*, see 18:27 and the note. [↑](#footnote-ref-292)
293. Cf. Tg; literally, “their heart went out,” the heart being the locus of understanding. [↑](#footnote-ref-293)
294. Skinner, *Genesis*, 473. [↑](#footnote-ref-294)
295. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 422. [↑](#footnote-ref-295)
296. Cf. von Rad, *Genesis*, 376. [↑](#footnote-ref-296)
297. Westermann, *Genesis 37—50*, 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-297)
298. So Alter, *Genesis*, 244, 245. [↑](#footnote-ref-298)
299. See the comment. [↑](#footnote-ref-299)
300. Humphreys, *Joseph*, 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-300)
301. Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 289. [↑](#footnote-ref-301)
302. Cf. M. J. Williams, “Lies, lies, I Tell You!” *CTJ* 43 (2008): 9-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-302)
303. Cf. Seebass, *Genesis* 3:92.. [↑](#footnote-ref-303)
304. Fretheim, “Genesis,” 599. [↑](#footnote-ref-304)
305. Cf. Jerome*, Hebrew Questions on Genesis,* 189. [↑](#footnote-ref-305)
306. See e.g., Brayford, *Genesis*, 425-26. [↑](#footnote-ref-306)
307. Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 163. [↑](#footnote-ref-307)
308. M. Polliack, “Joseph’s Journey: From Trauma to Resolution,” in Brenner et al., *Genesis*, 147-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-308)
309. Cf. von Rad, *Genesis*, 378. [↑](#footnote-ref-309)
310. Cf. Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis 46-67*, 226-28. [↑](#footnote-ref-310)
311. Cf. Brayford, *Genesis*, 421. [↑](#footnote-ref-311)
312. Westermann, *Genesis* *37-50*, 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-312)
313. Calvin, *Genesis* 2:343. [↑](#footnote-ref-313)
314. S. Singer, in Eskenazi/Weiss (eds.). *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*, 254. [↑](#footnote-ref-314)
315. See the comment. [↑](#footnote-ref-315)
316. Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-316)
317. So Qimchi, *Genesis*, on the verse. [↑](#footnote-ref-317)
318. Cf. Hamilton, *Genesis 18—50*, 532. [↑](#footnote-ref-318)
319. Cf. Rashi, *Br’šyt*, 478. [↑](#footnote-ref-319)
320. Luther, *Genesis 38—44*, 275, 277. [↑](#footnote-ref-320)
321. Cf. Calvin, *Genesis* 2:347. [↑](#footnote-ref-321)
322. Cf. Wenham, *Genesis 16—50*, 410. [↑](#footnote-ref-322)
323. Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 297. [↑](#footnote-ref-323)
324. Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 37—50*, 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-324)
325. Brett, *Genesis*, 121; *GenR* 90:9 imagines Jacob’s dismissive reply, “Are your sons not my sons too”? [↑](#footnote-ref-325)
326. Reno, *Genesis*, 277. [↑](#footnote-ref-326)
327. The parallel with 41:57 suggests that *’ereṣ* refers to the world and not just the country of Canaan. [↑](#footnote-ref-327)
328. More literally, “Go again, get us supplies, a little food.” The asyndetic sequence of verbs suggests that *šub* functions as a semi-auxiliary verb (cf. JM 177bcd) meaning “repeat” as in 30:31 (cf. Tal, *Genesis*, 181-82\*), though as part of a commission to the brothers to go back to Egypt, it likely also suggests the connotation “go back” (as Vg assumes; LXX has a double translation). Contrast v. 13 and the note. [↑](#footnote-ref-328)
329. The infinitive precedes the finite verb for emphasis: “in affirming he affirmed.” The idiom recurs twice in 43:7, in 43:20, and in 44:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-329)
330. The two verbs are cohortative, indicating willingness. [↑](#footnote-ref-330)
331. It’s not clear why Jacob is called Israel in vv. 6, 8, and 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-331)
332. The hapax *zimrāh* might derive from *zāmar* II “prune” (LXX has “fruits”)or from *zāmar* I “make music” (Tg has “what is praised;” Vg “the best of the fruits,” perhaps a double translation) or from *HALOT*’s *zāmar* III suggesting “strength.” [↑](#footnote-ref-332)
333. The *dᵉbaš* which flows in Canaan along with milk commonly denotes the sweet sauce made from fruits such as dates, rather than bee honey. [↑](#footnote-ref-333)
334. Here *šûb* is a full verb and is helped by a semi-auxiliary (contrast v. 2 and the note). [↑](#footnote-ref-334)
335. The name of God comes before the verb, as it regularly does, suggesting emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-335)
336. TgNeoph and TgPsJ nicely take Jacob to mean “as I have been bereaved of Joseph, so I will have been bereaved of Simeon and Benjamin.” [↑](#footnote-ref-336)
337. Literally, “roll on us.” [↑](#footnote-ref-337)
338. The word order shows v. 22a to be a circumstantial clause. [↑](#footnote-ref-338)
339. A *w* prefixes “the God of your father.” [↑](#footnote-ref-339)
340. Only in 12:12, 14; 43:32 does Genesis use the gentilic *miṣrîm*, apparently referring to some Egyptians as opposed to Egyptians generally for which it uses *miṣrayim* (as one uses “America” to denote Americans in general). [↑](#footnote-ref-340)
341. Literally “five times,” but five is a round figure to suggest “several” and not to be pressed, like “two or three” or “a dozen” in English (cf. 45:22; 47:2; Lev 26:8; Judg 18:2; 1 Sam 17:40; 21:3 [4]). [↑](#footnote-ref-341)
342. On *ḥālîlāh*, see the footnote to 18:25. [↑](#footnote-ref-342)
343. LXX translates “But he said, ‘And now, as you say, so it will be: the man with whom the chalice is found…’” But this makes the second half of the verse contradict the first half. Rather the man begins with a concessive clause (cf. Qimchi, *Genesis*, on the verse). [↑](#footnote-ref-343)
344. Seebass, *Genesis* 3:105. [↑](#footnote-ref-344)
345. Cf. Arnold, *Genesis*, 355. [↑](#footnote-ref-345)
346. Cf. Alter, *Genesis*, 252. [↑](#footnote-ref-346)
347. Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis 46-67*, 232. [↑](#footnote-ref-347)
348. Alter, *Genesis*, 253. [↑](#footnote-ref-348)
349. Ephrem, “Genesis,” 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-349)
350. Brett, *Genesis*, 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-350)
351. Cf. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 428-29. [↑](#footnote-ref-351)
352. “Obituary Bassam Ghraoui,” *The Economist* 12 May 2018, 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-352)
353. Cf. Willet, *Hexapla in Genesin & Exodum*, 358. [↑](#footnote-ref-353)
354. Reno, *Genesis*, 278. [↑](#footnote-ref-354)
355. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 342. [↑](#footnote-ref-355)
356. Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 300. [↑](#footnote-ref-356)
357. Cf. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 430. [↑](#footnote-ref-357)
358. Fretheim, “Gonesis,” 636. [↑](#footnote-ref-358)
359. Reno, *Genesis*, 279. [↑](#footnote-ref-359)
360. Cf. Seebass, *Genesis* 3:100. [↑](#footnote-ref-360)
361. Cf. Redford, *A Study of the Biblical Story of Joseph*, 235. [↑](#footnote-ref-361)
362. Cf. Wenham, *Genesis 16—50*, 424. [↑](#footnote-ref-362)
363. Cf. Wenham, *Genesis 16—50*, 424. [↑](#footnote-ref-363)
364. Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 303. [↑](#footnote-ref-364)
365. See “What You Wear, How You Dream, What You Eat, How You Lie, How You Cry,” at the end of the commentary on Gen 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-365)
366. Cf. Willet, *Hexapla in Genesin & Exodum*, 362. [↑](#footnote-ref-366)
367. Kidner, *Genesis*, 204. [↑](#footnote-ref-367)
368. Cf. von Rad, *Genesis*, 384. [↑](#footnote-ref-368)
369. See e.g., A. Annus (ed.), *Divination and Interpretation of Signs in the Ancient World* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-369)
370. Cf. Alter, *Genesis*, 260. [↑](#footnote-ref-370)
371. Cf. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 433. [↑](#footnote-ref-371)
372. Cf. Driver, *Genesis*, 364. [↑](#footnote-ref-372)
373. The infinitive before the finite verb adds emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-373)
374. See the footnote to 18:25. [↑](#footnote-ref-374)
375. For good, TgPsJ clarifies. [↑](#footnote-ref-375)
376. LXX omits “my”; Rachel was not Jacob’s only wife (Tal, *Genesis*, 184\*). [↑](#footnote-ref-376)
377. See the footnote at 37:33. [↑](#footnote-ref-377)
378. Rather than “the earth,” in the context. [↑](#footnote-ref-378)
379. More literally “to make live for you for a big escape group”: the expression mixes two possible forms of expression, the syntactical equivalent of a composite morphological form. Instead of repeating *l*,it would have been more regular to make either “you” or “a big escape group” the direct object, as in v. 7a. [↑](#footnote-ref-379)
380. For the translation of *tiwwārēš* from *yāraš*,, cf. TgPsJ; “perish” (LXX, Aq, Vg, TgOnq) seems to be simply a loose translation. With this meaning, the verb might be read as a byform of or as having the resonances of *rûš* “be in want.” [↑](#footnote-ref-380)
381. The sentence involves an ellipse: he sound (*qôl*)was the sound of Joseph’s voice (v. 2) that made itself heard, and the explanation of the noise is that Joseph’s brothers have come. [↑](#footnote-ref-381)
382. See the footnote to 43:34. [↑](#footnote-ref-382)
383. Vg “five best robes” conveys the sense. [↑](#footnote-ref-383)
384. Cf. Aq. LXX, Vg have “don’t be angry,” but this is not the usual meaning of *rāgaz* nor does it fit the context. [↑](#footnote-ref-384)
385. Vg’s “it is enough” understates the significance of *rab*. [↑](#footnote-ref-385)
386. See the introduction to the “Interpretation” section relating to 43:1—44:13. [↑](#footnote-ref-386)
387. Cf. Coats, *Genesis*, 292. [↑](#footnote-ref-387)
388. Cf. von Rad, *Genesis*, 388. [↑](#footnote-ref-388)
389. Cf. Skinner, *Genesis*, 485. [↑](#footnote-ref-389)
390. See the comment on 33:3b. [↑](#footnote-ref-390)
391. Cf. Keil/Delitzsch, *Pentateuch*, 364. [↑](#footnote-ref-391)
392. J. Joosten, “Biblical Rhetoric as Illustrated by Judah’s Speech in Genesis44:18-34,” *JSOT* 41 (2016): 15-30 (23-25). [↑](#footnote-ref-392)
393. Cf. Hamilton, *Genesis*, 569. [↑](#footnote-ref-393)
394. Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 174, 175. [↑](#footnote-ref-394)
395. Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 37—50*, 137. [↑](#footnote-ref-395)
396. Alter, *Genesis*, 263, 264. [↑](#footnote-ref-396)
397. So Driver, *Genesis*, 360. [↑](#footnote-ref-397)
398. Wenham, *Genesis 16—50*, 427. [↑](#footnote-ref-398)
399. Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 307. [↑](#footnote-ref-399)
400. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 389. [↑](#footnote-ref-400)
401. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 436. [↑](#footnote-ref-401)
402. Brett, *Genesis*, 124-25. [↑](#footnote-ref-402)
403. Sarna, *Genesis*, 308. [↑](#footnote-ref-403)
404. Cf. Luther, *Genesis 45—50*, 24-37. [↑](#footnote-ref-404)
405. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 345. [↑](#footnote-ref-405)
406. Speiser, *Genesis*, 338. [↑](#footnote-ref-406)
407. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 394. [↑](#footnote-ref-407)
408. Fretheim, “Genesis,” 646. [↑](#footnote-ref-408)
409. See Skinner, *Genesis*, 488;more recently, J. Van Seters, “The Geography of the Exodus,” in J. A. Dearman and M. P. Graham (eds.), *The Land That I Will Show You* (J. M. Miller Festschrift; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 255-76 (267-69). [↑](#footnote-ref-409)
410. Cf. Dillmann, *Genesis* 2:409. [↑](#footnote-ref-410)
411. KSG. [↑](#footnote-ref-411)
412. Brett, *Genesis*, 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-412)
413. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 350. [↑](#footnote-ref-413)
414. Hamilton, *Genesis 18—50*, 587. [↑](#footnote-ref-414)
415. See T. J. Stone, “Joseph in the Likeness of Adam,” in MacDonald et al. (eds.), *Genesis and Christian Theology*, 62-73. [↑](#footnote-ref-415)
416. KSG. [↑](#footnote-ref-416)
417. For the plural, cf. Ezek 1:1; 8:3; 40:2; 43:3: in Ezekiel, at least, the plural may suggest the various things that appeared in the vision. [↑](#footnote-ref-417)
418. The infinitive absolute (here qal following hiphil, and following the finite verb) makes it emphatic. [↑](#footnote-ref-418)
419. Nemu’el in Num 26:12. [↑](#footnote-ref-419)
420. Ṣeraḥ in Num 26:13. [↑](#footnote-ref-420)
421. Yašûb in Num 26:24. [↑](#footnote-ref-421)
422. The plural is conventional-- there was only one (cf. v. 23). [↑](#footnote-ref-422)
423. In Num 26:15 Ṣepon. [↑](#footnote-ref-423)
424. In Num 26:16 Ozni. [↑](#footnote-ref-424)
425. He does not appear in Num 26:44. [↑](#footnote-ref-425)
426. The list of names in v. 21 is particularly different from that in Num 26:38-39. [↑](#footnote-ref-426)
427. The plural follows the regular formula even though there is only one son to name. [↑](#footnote-ref-427)
428. In Num 26:42 Šuḥam. [↑](#footnote-ref-428)
429. *Yārāh* hiphil without an object is unusual; LXX “appear” takes *hôrōt* as niphal from *rā’āh*. [↑](#footnote-ref-429)
430. While both Joseph and Jacob have done a fair amount of crying in Genesis so far, and an unannounced change to Jacob as subject in the middle of v. 29 would be possible, the change to Jacob as subject in v. 30 supports the more obvious assumption that Joseph is the subject through v. 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-430)
431. The verb is cohortative. [↑](#footnote-ref-431)
432. Whereas Joseph “went up” to Goshen (v. 29) which was higher in altitude than the Nile and was on the way to Canaan (to which Israelites “went up”), here “go up” will mean “go up river” or “go up town” (cf. the footnote to 26:23). [↑](#footnote-ref-432)
433. The phraseology implies an ellipse—it has been their occupation from their youth and also their’ ancestors’ occupation. [↑](#footnote-ref-433)
434. For this meaning of *qāṣeh*, cf. BDB, 892a; *DCH*, 280b. [↑](#footnote-ref-434)
435. See the footnote to 43:34. [↑](#footnote-ref-435)
436. On this verb, see the comment on 12:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-436)
437. LXX has an unusually different version of vv. 5-6 (see e.g., Speiser, *Genesis* 350-51), possibly to tidy up the jerky sequence of questions and answers; Pharaoh’s addressing his response to the brother’s question by speaking to Joseph might reflect courtly protocol (cf. Wenhem, *Genesis 16—50*, 446). [↑](#footnote-ref-437)
438. Literally, “the days of”; so also in v. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-438)
439. Prefixing *hā’āreṣ* with the word “entire” implies that the verse refers to more than the country of Egypt, which then gets an explicit reference later in the verse; the expression refers to the entire “world” that concerns Genesis at this point (cf. 41:57; 43:1). [↑](#footnote-ref-439)
440. CF. LXX, Vg, for the meaning of *lāhāh*, which comes only here and looks like a byform of *lā’āh*; the use of the noun *tᵉlā’āh* (Exod 18:8; Num 20:14; Neh 9:32; Lam 3:5) helps to clarify the verb’s meaning. But MT’s daghes in the *h* of *wattēlah* suggests *lāhāh* meaning “be confused/crazy” (cf. Qimchi, *Genesis*, on the verse). [↑](#footnote-ref-440)
441. Ironically, *lāqaṭ* most often means “gather” in the sense of “glean.” [↑](#footnote-ref-441)
442. LXX, Vg have “bring,” the verb which will come in v. 17, but the verb is *hābû* (picking up the Egyptians’ *hābāh*) from *yāhab* not *hābî’û* from *bô’*. [↑](#footnote-ref-442)
443. *Nāhal* eymologically means “lead to a watering-place (or station), and cause to rest there” (BDB, 625a); cf. Isa 51:18; Ps 23:3 9 (cf. Rashi, *Br’šyt*, 523). [↑](#footnote-ref-443)
444. LXX has *sōmata*, which could cover live bodies as well as dead ones, but *gᵉwiyyāh* more often means a dead body (Judg 14:8-9; 1 Sam 31:10, 12; Ps 110:6; Nah 3:3). [↑](#footnote-ref-444)
445. LXX and Vg manipulate the text to avoid speaking of people and land both dying, which involves a zeugma (Skinner, *Genesis*, 500); more literally, the land will become a waste (v. 19b). [↑](#footnote-ref-445)
446. Tg takes *le‘ārîm* to mean “by towns” (cf. *DCH* 6:238a, though not noting this passage). For *he‘ĕbîr… le‘ārîm* “he moved to towns” SP, LXX suggest *he‘ĕbîd… la‘ăbādîm* “he made them into serfs,” which assimilates to v. 19 and makes easier sense. [↑](#footnote-ref-446)
447. For the yiqtol *nimṣā’* it is hard to justify LXX’s “we have found” (but cf. *HALOT* 352b, which sees it as an instance of this phrase being an expression of gratitude). Vg seems to take the verb as cohortative; final aleph verbs generally lack a special cohortative form (see JM 114b). The subsequent *waw-­*consecutive suggests an unmarked conditional clause (GK 159c). [↑](#footnote-ref-447)
448. Coats, *Genesis*, 294. [↑](#footnote-ref-448)
449. Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 37—50*, 154. [↑](#footnote-ref-449)
450. De La Torre, *Exodus*, 338. [↑](#footnote-ref-450)
451. See further Westermann, *Genesis 37—50*, 173-76. [↑](#footnote-ref-451)
452. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 405. [↑](#footnote-ref-452)
453. See e.g., C. A. Redmount, “Bitter Lives,” in M. D. Coogan (ed.), *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*  (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 78-121. [↑](#footnote-ref-453)
454. See the comment on 31:54; and cf. Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis 46-67*, 245-46. [↑](#footnote-ref-454)
455. So Westermann, *Genesis 37—50*, 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-455)
456. See the comment. [↑](#footnote-ref-456)
457. Cf. Luther, *Genesis 45—50*, 76-77. [↑](#footnote-ref-457)
458. Cf. Dillmann, *Genesis* 2:412. TgPsJ takes the promise to refer simply to the exodus. [↑](#footnote-ref-458)
459. Cf. Nicolas of Lyra, *Postilla super totam Bibliam*, on the passage; cf. Schroeder, *Genesis*, 216. [↑](#footnote-ref-459)
460. Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 37—50*, 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-460)
461. So e.g., Ibn Ezra, *Genesis*,403. [↑](#footnote-ref-461)
462. This playful observation develops comments in Frankel, *Fuve Books of Miriam*, xx. [↑](#footnote-ref-462)
463. LXX makes only three of the ten Benjamin’s sons; six are grandsons and one a great-grandson. 1 Chron 7:6 also has just three sons, though the names vary slightly. [↑](#footnote-ref-463)
464. Cf. Brett, *Genesis*, 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-464)
465. The more notable differences are listed in the translation notes. [↑](#footnote-ref-465)
466. Cf. Hamilton, *Genesis 18—50*, 592-93. [↑](#footnote-ref-466)
467. On these numbers see further Hamilton, *Genesis 18—50*, 597-99. Jerome has a nice discussion of the theological implications of Acts’ quoting the Septuagint’s version of the numbers (*Hebrew Questions on Genesis*, 80-81). [↑](#footnote-ref-467)
468. Luther, *Genesis 45—50*, 87, 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-468)
469. Cf. Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah* 3:327. [↑](#footnote-ref-469)
470. Cf. B. Smith, “The Central Role of Judah in Genesis 37-50,” *BSac* 162 (2005): 158-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-470)
471. Cf. Redford, *Study of the Biblical Story of Joseph*, 235. [↑](#footnote-ref-471)
472. Cf. Skinner, *Genesis*, 497. [↑](#footnote-ref-472)
473. Fretheim, “Gonesis,” 655. [↑](#footnote-ref-473)
474. Cf Skinner, *Genesis*, 498. [↑](#footnote-ref-474)
475. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 355. [↑](#footnote-ref-475)
476. Speiser, *Genesis*, 351. [↑](#footnote-ref-476)
477. See *HALOT* against *BDB* in *māgôr*. [↑](#footnote-ref-477)
478. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 402-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-478)
479. Cf. Rashi, *Br’šyt*, 521. [↑](#footnote-ref-479)
480. Gunkel (*Genesis*, 442) notes how this passage fits the earlier context. [↑](#footnote-ref-480)
481. Cf. Driver, *Genesis*, 372. [↑](#footnote-ref-481)
482. CF. Luther’s comments, *Genesis 45—50*, 122-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-482)
483. Cf. Skinner, *Genesis*, 500. [↑](#footnote-ref-483)
484. Rashi, *Br’šyt*, 524. [↑](#footnote-ref-484)
485. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 405. [↑](#footnote-ref-485)
486. A striking instance is the puzzled dismay expressed by Chysostom’s translator, R. C. Hill, that the commentator (“usually sensitive to social injustice”) fails to critique Joseph on this point (*Genesis*, 251). [↑](#footnote-ref-486)
487. Coats, *Genesis*, 299. [↑](#footnote-ref-487)
488. Cf. Fretheim, “Genesis,” 654. [↑](#footnote-ref-488)
489. See e.g., Sarna, *Genesis*, 322. [↑](#footnote-ref-489)
490. Dillmann, *Genesis* 2:429, gives other examples. [↑](#footnote-ref-490)
491. Coats, *Genesis*, 298. [↑](#footnote-ref-491)
492. See the footnotes to these two verses. [↑](#footnote-ref-492)
493. Though Josephus (*Ant* II, 7:7) has Joseph giving it back again after the famine is over. [↑](#footnote-ref-493)
494. The asyndeton suggests that the first clause is circumstantial. [↑](#footnote-ref-494)
495. LXX “on the top of his staff” implies *hammaṭṭeh* for *hammaṭṭāh*, but Aq, Sym imply *hammaṭṭāh*. [↑](#footnote-ref-495)
496. See the footnote to 22:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-496)
497. *Ḥālāh* suggests weakness such that one might associate with the approach of death more than simply an illness from which one might expect to recover (cf. Aq). [↑](#footnote-ref-497)
498. The name of God comes before the verb, as it regularly does, suggesting emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-498)
499. The word order with the subject before the verb suggests that this clause is circumstantial; so also v. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-499)
500. LXX Paddan Aram, as elsewhere. [↑](#footnote-ref-500)
501. *’Alay*, an expression suggesting one is overwhelmed: see BDB, 753b, also the occurrence in 42:36 (Alter, *Genesis*, 288). [↑](#footnote-ref-501)
502. See the footnote to 35:16. [↑](#footnote-ref-502)
503. The usual meaning of the hitpael of *pālal* fits this occurrence of the rare piel, though in post-biblical Hebrew the verb can mean thought or expected (cf. Tg; Ibn Ezra, *Genesis*,414). LXX, Vg have “I was not deprived.” [↑](#footnote-ref-503)
504. LXX takes *wayyištaḥû* as plural, but it has been singular elsewhere (e.g., 47:31) and for the plural Genesis has used *wayyištaḥăwû* (e.g., 43:26). [↑](#footnote-ref-504)
505. LXX has “blessed them,” conforming the text to what seems to happen. [↑](#footnote-ref-505)
506. *Dāgāh* looks like a denominative from *dāg* “fish” (as Tg implies). [↑](#footnote-ref-506)
507. LXX “will be blessed” implies *yᵉbōrak* for MT’s *yᵉbārēk*, an easier reading. [↑](#footnote-ref-507)
508. The declarative/performative qatal suggests a speech act, “I hereby give” (Seebass, *Genesis* 3:157). [↑](#footnote-ref-508)
509. “You” in v. 21 is plural; in v. 22 it is singular. [↑](#footnote-ref-509)
510. Vg, Tg have “share,” but *šᵉkem* does not have that meaning elsewhere; LXX has “Shechem,” but “one” is then masculine and names of towns are usually feminine; Aq has “shoulder,” the usual meaning of the common noun. [↑](#footnote-ref-510)
511. I take the qatal as another declarative/performative (see the footnote to v. 22a), but it might rather have future perfect reference, “which I will have got” (cf. Ibn Ezra, *Genesis*,417): see the comment. [↑](#footnote-ref-511)
512. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 445. [↑](#footnote-ref-512)
513. But see the discussion in Wenham, *Genesis 166-50*, 461. [↑](#footnote-ref-513)
514. Hamilton, *Genesis 18—50*, 621. [↑](#footnote-ref-514)
515. See the comment. [↑](#footnote-ref-515)
516. S. Gevirtz, “The Life Spans of Joseph and Enoch,” *JBL* 96 (1977): 570-71. [↑](#footnote-ref-516)
517. Sarna, *Genesis*, 324. [↑](#footnote-ref-517)
518. Brayford, *Genesis*, 440. [↑](#footnote-ref-518)
519. Rashi, *Br’šyt*, 528-29. [↑](#footnote-ref-519)
520. Brett, *Genesis*, 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-520)
521. Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 325. [↑](#footnote-ref-521)
522. Cf. Jerome, *Hebrew Questions on Genesis*, 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-522)
523. Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 37—50*, 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-523)
524. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 447. [↑](#footnote-ref-524)
525. Hamilton, *Genesis* *18—50*, 630. [↑](#footnote-ref-525)
526. Cf. J. B. Wolowelsky, “Rachel’s Burial,” *JBQ* 45 (2017): 111-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-526)
527. Frankel, *Five Books of Miriam*, 87, 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-527)
528. Cf. Hamilton, *Genesis* *18—50*, 634. [↑](#footnote-ref-528)
529. Cf. Ibn Ezra, *Genesis*,415. [↑](#footnote-ref-529)
530. Kidner, *Genesis*, 212. [↑](#footnote-ref-530)
531. Cf. von Rad, *Genesis*, 410-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-531)
532. KSG. [↑](#footnote-ref-532)
533. Cf. Willet, *Hexapla in Genesin & Exodum*, 380. [↑](#footnote-ref-533)
534. Cf. von Rad, *Genesis*, 412. [↑](#footnote-ref-534)
535. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 361. [↑](#footnote-ref-535)
536. Cf. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 449. [↑](#footnote-ref-536)
537. Seebass, *Genesis* 3:162. [↑](#footnote-ref-537)
538. Cf. Barth, *Dogmatics* II, 2:355-56. [↑](#footnote-ref-538)
539. Willet, *Hexapla in Genesin & Exodum*, 383. [↑](#footnote-ref-539)
540. Cf. Qimchi, *Genesis*, on the verse. [↑](#footnote-ref-540)
541. Brayford, *Genesis*, 443. [↑](#footnote-ref-541)
542. Wenham, *Genesis 16—50,* 345, following Longacre, *Joseph*, 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-542)
543. The cohortative makes explicit that a final clause follows the imperative. [↑](#footnote-ref-543)
544. While the form *yiqrā’* is the same as that of “and he called” earlier in the verse, one should presumably derive this word from BDB’s *qāra’* II, a byform of *qārāh*, though perhaps the expression invites the brothers to think in terms of their destiny “summoning” them. [↑](#footnote-ref-544)
545. Literally, “in the latter part of the days.” LXX has “the last of the days,” Vg “the last/newest days.” [↑](#footnote-ref-545)
546. LXX takes the hapax *paḥaz* to denote Reuben’s willful turbulence, but v. 4 is making a transition to talk of his fate (Vg, Tg). [↑](#footnote-ref-546)
547. “Bed” is plural, perhaps pejorative (cf. Lev 18:22; 20:13) (cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 331). [↑](#footnote-ref-547)
548. For this meaning of *’āz* here, see BDB. [↑](#footnote-ref-548)
549. “My couch” in the parallel colon does double duty as also the object of the first verb (cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 331). [↑](#footnote-ref-549)
550. The final colon is an unmarked relative clause (Ehrlich, *Randglossen* 1:243) in which the verb can therefore be third person (see JM 158n, GK 144p), like an English sentence such as “you are one who climbs,” not “you are one who climb.” [↑](#footnote-ref-550)
551. *Mᵉkērōt* comes only here; but a derivation from *karat* seems plausible and makes a good link with 34:13-29. See *DCH*, which also notes the possible meanings counsel, weapon, staff, and beguilement: and if the word could be understood as having any of these meanings, they would not be inappropriate. [↑](#footnote-ref-551)
552. While *kābōd* usually means “honor,” sometimes (e.g., Ps 30:12 [13]) it seems to be an alternative form to *kābēd* and to refer anatomically to the liver but metaphorically to the inner person, like words such as heart in English; *nepeš* in the parallel colon helps clarify the meaning of *kābōd*. The masculine noun is preceded by a feminine verb from *yāḥad* whose gender may be assimilated to that of the verb in the previous colon. [↑](#footnote-ref-552)
553. *‘Āqar* (piel) recalls *‘Ākar* in 34:30 (C. M. Carmichael, “Some **Sayings** in Genesis 49,” *JBL* 88 [1969]: 435-44 [435-36]). [↑](#footnote-ref-553)
554. Given that Gen 34 does not refer to hamstringing oxen, Vg, Sym, Tg take *šûr* to be the other *šûr* meaning “wall” which comes in v. 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-554)
555. The extraposed pronoun anticipatorily emphasizes the subsequent verbal suffix (GK 135d) and also draws attention to a paronomasia: “You, as Judah (*yᵉhûdāh*), are one whom people confess (*yôdûkā*). “You are what your name means” (Westermann, *Genesis 37—50*, 227). Indeed, the “Jews” are etymologically the Judahites: Judah gave them their name (cf. Tg). [↑](#footnote-ref-555)
556. We do not really know how to distinguish the different Hebrew words for lion. [↑](#footnote-ref-556)
557. Or “ever”: R. C. Steiner (“Four Inner-Biblical Interpretations of Genesis 49:10” [*JBL* 132 [2013]: 33-60) sees this ambiguity subsequently picked up by Nathan, Ahijah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah. [↑](#footnote-ref-557)
558. The obvious translations of this colon are “until Shiloh comes” or “until he comes to Shiloh” (cf. recently S. Frolov, “Judah Comes to Shiloh,” *JBL* 131 [2012]: 417-22) but it is not obvious what they might refer to. I follow what Rashi (*Br’šyt*, 546) calls the midrashic interpretation that *šîlô* (K *šhlh*) needs redividing and repointing as *šay lô* (“[until there comes] tribute to him”); cf. the discussion in de Hoop, *Genesis 49*, 122-39 (and see R. C. Steiner, “Poetic Forms in the Masoretic Vocalization and Three Difficult Phrases in Jacob’s Blessing,” *JBL* 129 [2010]: 209-35 [219-24]): he thinks the repointing is unnecessary). It would not be surprising if the rare word *šay* had got lost from the colon, and the change generates good parallelism with the next colon. LXX implies *šellô* “[until there comes] what belongs to him,” which also provides good parallelism with the next colon, and has similar implications. Rashi himself follows Tg in assuming that the literal interpretation is “until the Messiah comes”; Ibn Ezra (*Genesis*, 430) assumes it refers to David himself—Judah will be in the lead until then (e.g., Num 10:14). The New Testament does not refer to v. 10, though v. 11 is significant in Mark 11 in connection with the story of Jesus’s Messiah-style entry to Jerusalem (see e.g., D. Krause, “The One Who Comes Unbinding the Blessing of Judah,” in J. A. Sanders and C. A. Evans [eds.], *Early Christian interpretation of the Scriptures of Israel* [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997], 141-53; S. P. Ahearne-Kroll, “Genesis in Mark’s Gospel,” in Moyise/Menken [eds.], *Genesis in the NT*, 27-41 [34-37]). [↑](#footnote-ref-558)
559. *’Ōsᵉrî* is an anomalous but not unparalleled construct of the participle (see Hamilton, *Genesis 18—50*, 655-56). [↑](#footnote-ref-559)
560. LXX “dark from… white from” makes poorer sense. [↑](#footnote-ref-560)
561. Or among the saddlebags or campfires: *mišpᵉtayim* comes only here and in Judg 5:16. Whereas etymology supports “campfires” (see BDB), the parallelism in Judg 5:16 supports “sheepfolds”; while de Hoop (*Genesis 49*, 151-56) argues for “saddlebags.” As in v. 5, if the word could be understood as having any of these meanings, they would not be inappropriate. [↑](#footnote-ref-561)
562. LXX, Vg take “his people” as object rather than the subject, but this understanding makes poor sense and eliminates the parallel with other verses that begin with an extraposed noun. Further, they take the verb *dîn* with words meaning “judge,” which gives a misleadingly judiciary meaning to the verb. [↑](#footnote-ref-562)
563. GK 109k sees this *yᵉhî* as an example of a jussive form that is really yiqtol in significance, but jussive meaning fits in the context of a number of wishes and prayers in the testament. [↑](#footnote-ref-563)
564. On such quasi-stative verbs, see GK 106g. [↑](#footnote-ref-564)
565. More precisely, a gang of attackers. *Gᵉdûd* comes from the root *gādad* whereas the two succeeding verbs come from the byform *gûd*. [↑](#footnote-ref-565)
566. LXX, Vg lack the odd “from” and LXX may attach the *m* to the end of the previous line, making explicit that the heel is “their heel.” [↑](#footnote-ref-566)
567. For *’êlāh* LXX implies *’ēlāh* “oak’ (cf. 35:4), but Aq has “deer.” [↑](#footnote-ref-567)
568. The masculine participle takes its gender from the word for the clan rather than from the word for “hind.” [↑](#footnote-ref-568)
569. I take *’imrȇ* as not from *’ōmer* “saying” but from the hapax *’immēr* denoting a baby animal such as a lamb (*HALOT*, 67b), though the audience might be reminded of the “sayings” of Baraq and Deborah in Judg 4—5: Baraq was a Naphtalite and maybe Deborah was, too, even though she was working in Ephraim, and Midrash Tehillim on Ps 22 (whose introduction refers to a hind) puts two and two together and infers that she is the hind set free (see W. G. Braude, *The Midrash on Psalms* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959] 1:297). [↑](#footnote-ref-569)
570. LXX, Vg take *šeper* as an Aramaism meaning “beauty”; I take it as an Ugariticism or Akkadianism meaning “fold” (see S. Gevirtz, “Naphtali in ‘The Blessing of Jacob,’” *JBL* 103 [1984]: 513-21). But the existence of the Aramaic word would add to the paronomasia possibilities suggested by the previous note. [↑](#footnote-ref-570)
571. BDB takes *bēn* as an anomalous construct; JM 96Eb would provide a rationale, though it does not treat this word as an example, and LXX, Vg, Tg take it as absolute. [↑](#footnote-ref-571)
572. LXX, Vg, Tg then take *pōrāt* as a participle from *pārāh* qualifying *bēn* and meaning fruitful, but the form is anomalous and the feminine is odd. More likely *pōrāt* is a noun. If it denotes a fruitful tree, its “daughters” would be its branches, but *bānôt* never elsewhere refers to plants, only to human beings and animals (cf. de Hoop, *Genesis 49*, 184). See further the comment. [↑](#footnote-ref-572)
573. The translation reverses the Hebrew word order (“by a spring its daughters”: this colon and the one that follows thus work abca’ rather than abcb’), which in English generates an even more elliptical impression. MT’s accents associate “by its spring” with the preceding words; the line is then a neat 3-3-3 tricolon, but one even harder to construe. [↑](#footnote-ref-573)
574. Vg takes the daughters as the subject of the apparently singular verb: see the comments in GK 44m; JM 42f. But if *pōrāt* is a feminine noun (see the earlier note), it can be the subject, which fits regular grammar and makes sense in the context. SP has *ṣ’ry* (“little”) for *ṣ‘dh* and LXX implies something similar (cf. Tal, *Genesis*, 203\*). [↑](#footnote-ref-574)
575. *Šûr* can mean a wall and *šûrāh* a row of fruit trees (see BDB, *DTT*), which together suggests a terrace. [↑](#footnote-ref-575)
576. They “embittered him,” not in the sense that they made him feel bitter but that they made his life bitter: cf. *mārar* piel in Exod 1:14 (Rashi, *Br’šyt*, 557). [↑](#footnote-ref-576)
577. LXX implies taking *wārōbû* as from a byform of *rîb* (SP reads a form from that verb) or as trading on the similarity between *rîb* and *rābab* “shoot,” which is much rarer but is signaled by the parallel colon and by v. 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-577)
578. Literally, “the arms of his hands.” [↑](#footnote-ref-578)
579. LXX, Vg have “God of your father,” but “God” is *’ēl* not *’ĕlōhê* and there are no parallels for *’ēl* *’ābîkā* as a construct phrase (none at all for *’ēl* as a construct in Genesis, and not many elsewhere). See comment. [↑](#footnote-ref-579)
580. “From” carries over from the previous colon (cf. Ibn Ezra, *Genesis*, on the passage), though the *’et* is odd. [↑](#footnote-ref-580)
581. LXX “of the steadfast mountains” suggests reading *hārê* for *hôray* and linking it with *‘ad* in the next colon (cf. *harărê* in Deut 33:15); either way, it draws attention to a paronomasia between *hôray* *‘ad* and *gib‘ōt‘ôlām*. [↑](#footnote-ref-581)
582. A *nāzîr*: “there is no need to invent the meaning ‘prince’” for the word(G. Meyer, “*nzr*,” in *TDOT* 9:306-11 [308]). [↑](#footnote-ref-582)
583. For the rare *‘ēd*, LXX presupposes *‘ôd* “still.” [↑](#footnote-ref-583)
584. Cf. Dillmann, *Genesis* 2:444. [↑](#footnote-ref-584)
585. See recently J. C. de Moor, “Genesis 49 and the Early History of Israel,” in J. C. de Moor and H. E. van Rooy (eds.), *Past, Present, Future* (Leiden: Brill 2000), 176-98. [↑](#footnote-ref-585)
586. See further R. de Hoop, *Genesis 49* (Leiden: Brill 1999), 252-308. [↑](#footnote-ref-586)
587. Sarna, *Genesis*, 331. [↑](#footnote-ref-587)
588. Redford, *Study of the Biblical Story of Joseph*, 45; though the comments on language and syntax at the end of the Introduction to this commentary imply a qualification to this judgment. [↑](#footnote-ref-588)
589. Luther, *Genesis 45—50*, 199. [↑](#footnote-ref-589)
590. See e.g., Hamilton, *Genesis 18—50*, 644-87. [↑](#footnote-ref-590)
591. For the contrary view and references, see R. Hendel, “Historical Context,” in Evans et al. (eds.), *Book of Genesis*, 49-81 (52-54). [↑](#footnote-ref-591)
592. See de Hoop, *Genesis 49*, 594-621; J.-D. Macchi (*Israël et ses tribus selon Genèse 49* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1999) argues systematically for a Persian origin on the Testament of Jacob. [↑](#footnote-ref-592)
593. Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 37—50*, 221. [↑](#footnote-ref-593)
594. Cf. Skinner, *Genesis*, 508, 533. [↑](#footnote-ref-594)
595. Rashi, *Br’šyt*, 539. [↑](#footnote-ref-595)
596. Denis the Carthusian (fifteenth century), “Enarratio in Genesim,” 437 (cf. Schroeder, *Genesis*, 242). [↑](#footnote-ref-596)
597. So Vg, Aq, Sym; see 35:18 and the comments. [↑](#footnote-ref-597)
598. KSG. [↑](#footnote-ref-598)
599. De La Torre, *Genesis*, 344. [↑](#footnote-ref-599)
600. Seebass, *Genesis* 3:167. [↑](#footnote-ref-600)
601. Cf. Willet, *Hexapla in Genesin & Exodum*, 389. [↑](#footnote-ref-601)
602. Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 37—50*, 226. [↑](#footnote-ref-602)
603. And to Reuben, if v. 7 also applies to Reuben (so Macchi, *Israël et ses tribus selon Genèse 49*, 66-69). [↑](#footnote-ref-603)
604. De La Torre, *Genesis*, 344. [↑](#footnote-ref-604)
605. See the translation note. [↑](#footnote-ref-605)
606. See T. D. Alexander, “The Regal Dimension of the *twldwt-y‘qb*,” in J. G. McConville and K. Mӧller (eds.), *Reading the Law* (G. J. Wenham Festschrift; New York: Clark, 2007),196-212 [↑](#footnote-ref-606)
607. Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 37—50*, 232. [↑](#footnote-ref-607)
608. Cf. Ibn Ezra, *Genesis*, 433. [↑](#footnote-ref-608)
609. Thus Macchi (*Israël et ses tribus selon Genèse 49*, 141-84) sees them as of separate, distinctive, northern, and earlier origin from the rest of the material. [↑](#footnote-ref-609)
610. E.g., von Rad, *Genesis*, 416; Coats uses the term in a more defined way (*Genesis*, 310). [↑](#footnote-ref-610)
611. Cf. Hamilton, *Genesis 18—50*, 664. [↑](#footnote-ref-611)
612. Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 338. [↑](#footnote-ref-612)
613. Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 341. [↑](#footnote-ref-613)
614. Cf. von Rad, *Genesis*, 422. [↑](#footnote-ref-614)
615. Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 37—50*, 235. [↑](#footnote-ref-615)
616. Cf. the comment on 48:15. [↑](#footnote-ref-616)
617. Cf. Luther, *Genesis 45—50*, 295. [↑](#footnote-ref-617)
618. Cf. Speiser, *Genesis*, 368, though he develops the point in a different direction. [↑](#footnote-ref-618)
619. Cf. *DCH*. [↑](#footnote-ref-619)
620. Cf. Hamilton, *Genesis 18—50*, 680. [↑](#footnote-ref-620)
621. See the footnote for LXX’s extension of the parallelism. [↑](#footnote-ref-621)
622. Hamilton, *Genesis 18—50*, 685-86. [↑](#footnote-ref-622)
623. B. Russell, “A Free Man’s Worship,”in *Mysticism and Logic and Other Essays* (reprinted London: George Allen, 1959), 46-57 *(*47). [↑](#footnote-ref-623)
624. See G. A. Rendsburg, “Israelian Hebrew Features in Genesis 49,” *Maarav* 8 (1992), pp. 161-170. [↑](#footnote-ref-624)
625. Dillmann, *Genesis* 2:445. [↑](#footnote-ref-625)
626. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 450. [↑](#footnote-ref-626)
627. C. R. Fontaine, “Forgotten Vices of Earth,” Habel/Wurst (eds.). *Earth Story in Genesis,* 200-10 (203). [↑](#footnote-ref-627)
628. LXX has “sons of Jacob,” which fits what follows; see the comment. [↑](#footnote-ref-628)
629. LXXA has “neck” (cf. 33:4; 45:14; 46:29), as one does when someone is alive (cf. Brayford, *Genesis*, 448). [↑](#footnote-ref-629)
630. The plural suggest the complex nature of the process. [↑](#footnote-ref-630)
631. Rashi (*Br’šyt*, 566) notes the possibility of taking this verb as *kārāh* II “purchase,” while TgOnq has “prepared.” [↑](#footnote-ref-631)
632. These three phrases might denote one or two or three groups. [↑](#footnote-ref-632)
633. *’Ābēl miṣrayim*. In place names (e.g., Num 33:49; Judg 7:22; 11:33), *’ābēl* means meadow (BDB) or brook (*HALOT*), though in other contexts it can be an adjective meaning “mourning” (37:35); the noun for mourning is *’ēbel*. So this comment on the name parallels comments on names in (e.g.) 11:9; 16:14; 19:22 which suggest paronomasia rather than etymology and note a new significance that a name gains rather than recording the name’s origin. [↑](#footnote-ref-633)
634. In the sense of “learned” or “realized.” Vg “were afraid” implies *wayyārᵉ’û* for MT *wayyir’û*. [↑](#footnote-ref-634)
635. The verb is preceded by the infinitive of the same root, adding emphasis; the usage recurs in vv. 24 and 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-635)
636. A conditional sentence with “suppressed apodosis” (Skinner, *Genesis*, 539). [↑](#footnote-ref-636)
637. The verb is odd, but see the comment; LXX has “they approached,” which would seem a more plausible verb, but it hardly indicates that LXX had a different text. [↑](#footnote-ref-637)
638. See the footnote to 34:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-638)
639. Literally, “the children of thirds”—which might mean the fourth generation (cf. Tal, *Genesis*, 205\*). [↑](#footnote-ref-639)
640. Literally, “he [someone] put.” [↑](#footnote-ref-640)
641. Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 37—50*, 197. [↑](#footnote-ref-641)
642. Cf. Coats, *Genesis*, 301. [↑](#footnote-ref-642)
643. Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 346. [↑](#footnote-ref-643)
644. See the comment on 25:8. [↑](#footnote-ref-644)
645. Cf. von Rad, *Genesis*, 425. [↑](#footnote-ref-645)
646. Arnold, *Genesis*, 372. [↑](#footnote-ref-646)
647. Cf. Hamilton, *Genesis 18—50*, 689. [↑](#footnote-ref-647)
648. Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 347. [↑](#footnote-ref-648)
649. Cf. Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis 46-67*, 273. [↑](#footnote-ref-649)
650. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 425. [↑](#footnote-ref-650)
651. Cf. Fretheim, “Genesis,” 669. [↑](#footnote-ref-651)
652. See further Redford, *Study of the Biblical Story of Joseph*, 240-41. [↑](#footnote-ref-652)
653. *Postilla super totam Bibliam*, on the passage; cf. Schroeder, *Genesis*, 276. [↑](#footnote-ref-653)
654. Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 37—50*, 200. [↑](#footnote-ref-654)
655. Cf. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 368. [↑](#footnote-ref-655)
656. Cf. J. Berman, “Identity Politics and the Burial of Jacob,” *CBQ* 68 (2006): 11-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-656)
657. Cf. Dillmann, *Genesis* 2:487. Taking the expression to mean “at the side of the Jordan” (B. Gemser, “*Be‘ēber hajjardēn*,” *VT* 2 [1952]: 349-55) hardly reduces the puzzle of why the cortege was in the vicinity of the Jordan. A. Demsky suggests that Jordan is a place near the Mediterranean (“The Route of Jacob’s Funeral Cortege,” in Brettler/Fishbane [eds.], *Minḥah le-Naḥum*, 54-64). [↑](#footnote-ref-657)
658. Cf. Pirson, *Lord of the Dreams*, 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-658)
659. Brett, *Genesis*, 135. [↑](#footnote-ref-659)
660. Luther, *Genesis 45—50*, 323, 325. [↑](#footnote-ref-660)
661. Coats, *Genesis*, 312. [↑](#footnote-ref-661)
662. See e.g., the Akkadian “Counsels of Wisdom,” *ANET*, 426-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-662)
663. Cf. von Rad, *Genesis*, 432. [↑](#footnote-ref-663)
664. Cf. Arnold, *Genesis*, 388. [↑](#footnote-ref-664)
665. Cf. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 373-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-665)
666. Cf. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 464. [↑](#footnote-ref-666)
667. Calvin, *Genesis* 2:487. [↑](#footnote-ref-667)
668. J. M. A. Janssen, “Egyptological Remarks on *The Story of Joseph in Genesis*,” *Jaarbericht van het Vooraziatisch-Egyptisch Genootchap* 14 (1955–1956) 63–72 (71). See e.g., the closing paragraph of the Teachings of Ptah-hotep (*ANET*, 414). [↑](#footnote-ref-668)
669. See the comment on 47:28. [↑](#footnote-ref-669)
670. On this verb, see the comment on 21:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-670)
671. Westermann, *Genesis 37—50*, 209. [↑](#footnote-ref-671)
672. Cf. Seebass, *Genesis* 3:191-92, 196-97. [↑](#footnote-ref-672)
673. Denis the Carthusian, “Enarratio in Genesim,” 469; cf. Schroeder, *Genesis*, 281. [↑](#footnote-ref-673)
674. The subtitle of R. E. Longacre, *Joseph* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1989). [↑](#footnote-ref-674)
675. See the comment. [↑](#footnote-ref-675)
676. I take it that it is this understanding of providence that Westermann disputes (*Genesis 37—50*, 143). [↑](#footnote-ref-676)
677. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 294. [↑](#footnote-ref-677)
678. Calvin, *Genesis* 2:378. [↑](#footnote-ref-678)
679. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 393 [↑](#footnote-ref-679)
680. In the examples that follow, I have assumed that Genesis itself affirms the convictions expressed by Joseph (and Pharaoh). [↑](#footnote-ref-680)
681. Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 37—50*, 248; with M. V. Fox’s comments, *Proverbs 10—31* (New Haven: Yale University, 2009), 658, 674-75. [↑](#footnote-ref-681)
682. Cf. Seebass, *Genesis* 3:113-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-682)
683. Katherine Sonderegger expounds them in *Systematic Theology Volume 1* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-683)