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7. AN EQUIVOCAL READING OF THE SALE OF JOSEPH¹

Edward L. Greenstein



Introduction

The story of Joseph and his brothers (Genesis 37–50) poses a particular sort of challenge to the modern reader. Especially in the early episode concerning the sale of Joseph into slavery (37:18-36 with 39:1), the text becomes almost consistently inconsistent. It wavers back and forth between conflicting narrative sequences, or “versions” of the story’s action. According to one version, the brothers throw Joseph into the pit with the original intention of letting him die. But then, at the behest of Judah, they sell Joseph to a passing caravan of Ishmaelites, who in turn sell Joseph in Egypt. According to the second version, the brothers throw Joseph in the pit, but Reuben plans to deceive the others and return Joseph surreptitiously to their father Jacob/Israel.² Then, unexpectedly, a passing group of Midianite traders removes Joseph from the pit and thereby confounds Reuben.

Such narrative style, in which inconsistent lines of action are interlaced through the text, may have been both familiar and acceptable to an ancient or preliterate audience,³ but it has rubbed against the sensibility of modern, Western readers. One scholar, in a valuable book-length study of the Joseph narrative, declares that “chapter 37 contains one of the most blatant discrepancies in the entire Pentateuch, viz., the contradiction surrounding Joseph’s sale into Egypt.”⁴ Typically, scholars have not read the

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text for what it is. Rather, modern analyses of the text tend to fall within three categories, none of which allows for a narrative unity in which inconsistencies may make up part of the narrative structure itself.

In the first category are readings of the text that express embarrassment at the inner contradictions and excuse them by attributing them to different authors⁵ or folk-traditions⁶ that have been ineptly combined. It is assumed, therefore, that divergent versions of the story were spliced together by an editor (or redactor) who was unsuccessful at eliminating the inconsistencies among his sources.⁷ As one notable commentator puts it, “The work of a competent writer surely presupposes an inner consistency of theme and details. Yet vv. 21-30, as they now read, are marked by inconsistency, duplication, and discrepancies.”⁸

Such an approach does point out the existence of irreconcilable aspects of the story, but it fails to proceed beyond this observation, resigning itself merely to tolerate the inconsistencies as unfortunate. It projects a “scientific” bias for inner consistency onto a work of literature as though it were scientific discourse and not narrative.⁹ Moreover, it analyzes the text in terms of its alleged historical components rather than in terms of the interaction of these components within the text. A literary approach must occupy itself with the integration of the two “versions” of the story within the text, without exclusive regard for logical consistency or the independent historical development of the divergent versions themselves.

The second category comprises readings that attend to one version of the story and ignore the other. Thus, some read only the version in which Joseph’s brothers sell him to the Ishmaelite caravanners.¹⁰ Others read only the version in which the Midianites pull Joseph out of the pit and thereby frustrate Reuben’s plan.¹¹ Such readings refuse to respect the text by failing to acknowledge twofold sequences of action.

In the third category are readings that attempt to smooth—or skip—over the various discrepancies between the two versions and harmonize them into a single narrative sequence. Several such readings thus identify the Ishmaelites with the Midianites, interpreting “Ishmaelites” as a generic term for “traders” on the basis of Judges 8:24.¹² A careful reading of the text, however, must

acknowledge that the Ishmaelites and the Midianites are distinguished from each other.¹³ For example, the former are described collectively as a "caravan," while the latter are depicted as "men." Furthermore, such readings overlook the fact that, according to one reading of verse 28 (see below), the Midianites sell Joseph to the Ishmaelites, who are said to have taken Joseph to Egypt (compare 39:1);¹⁴ but according to verse 36 it is the Midianites (Medanites) who convey Joseph into Egypt.¹⁵ This, together with our remarks above and more subtle ambiguities that will be discussed below, militates against a conflation of the two accounts in a paraphrase such as the following: "Seeing the Ishmaelite caravan coming along, the brothers decide instead to sell the boy into slavery, [but] it appears that the Midianites beat them to it."¹⁶

In my view it is the proper role of literary study to enable the reader to experience the text thoroughly—not to *explain* the text, but to *expose* it.¹⁷ Taking a cue from Martin Buber, the reader must experience the text not as an objectified "It" to be analyzed, but as a subjectified "Thou" to be encountered.¹⁸ Our approach will follow from the premise that a work of art is a systematic whole in which every part functions within the system. The reader of the text must be able to see each meaning-producing element in the text and to explain how these components interact to form a whole. With respect to our two versions of the sale of Joseph, our analysis will endeavor to expose the double narrative sequences and describe their interrelation and points of contact. It will then be revealed that there is in our text an artful correlation of sequences of action and structural arrangement.

Our approach has been facilitated considerably by the structural analysis of narratives by the late Roland Barthes.¹⁹ Barthes has applied his method to the analysis of another biblical narrative in which readers sense the presence of discrepancies—the story of Jacob's struggle with the angel (Gen. 32:23-33).²⁰ There Barthes embraces the narrative's ambiguity, which may have come about through the "tangling" of two "versions" of the story. He then goes on to show how the narrative proceeds not according to what we would regard as a logical sequence, but rather according to a "*metonymic montage*": "The themes . . . are *combined*, not '*developed*.' . . . Metonymic logic is that of the unconscious."²¹

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Such a view is mandated by the presence in the text of a "friction between two intelligibilities"²² in the narrative sequence. We may observe a similar "montage" of narrative sequences in the story of how Joseph was taken to Egypt. Here, too, the reader is manipulated to vacillate "between two intelligibilities." This effect may have been precisely the redactor's intention.²³

As we said above, biblical scholars generally assume that a redactor has woven together a text from various preexisting sources or traditions. Many then attempt to isolate these sources and traditions in order to reconstruct them in their earlier, more "original" state. It might then be possible to study the ideology of the author(s) of the sources, who represent diverse traditions or schools of Israelite thought. This, in fact, continues to be a major preoccupation of contemporary biblical scholarship. In a literary study, however, we are interested in the final product of the redactional process in the text as we have received it.²⁴ If the text that we accept as the final product contains discernible discrepancies between one verse and another, we do not presume that the redactor had attempted to remove them but failed. Rather, we allow that the redactor may have been well aware of the inconsistencies and desired to leave them in the text.²⁵

These remarks would not warrant reiteration were it not that even literary analyses of biblical literature that commit themselves to dealing with the text in its present form break down when they must face a text rife with discrepancy and duplication. In such cases they resort to source criticism.²⁶ But it behooves the student of biblical literature to acquire a method for reading biblical narratives *as they are told*, or as they "tell themselves."²⁷ In the analysis that follows, I shall attempt to remain sensitive to the narrative's own style and try not to impose our cultural expectations upon the text.

The Reading

We enter the Joseph narrative at the point where the brothers, already resentful of Joseph and his vision, spy him on his way to find them (37:18).²⁸ In unison ("They said one man to his brother") they decide to kill him. But the text becomes ambiguous

when the brothers say, "Now come, let us kill him, let us throw him into one of the pits."²⁹ It is not yet clear whether they intend to murder Joseph and throw his corpse into a pit or murder him by means of throwing him into a pit and leaving him to the elements. Then, either way, they plan to deceive their father by telling him that "an evil beast has eaten him." At this point Reuben intercedes, urging his brothers not to take Joseph's life with their own hands. The scrupulous reader, however, will observe that verse 21 also bears the seeds of ambiguity. First, it states that "Reuben heard" (of the brothers' plan), which might imply that he had somehow been absent from the brothers' deliberation. Second, it relates that Reuben "rescued him [Joseph] from their hand," which could mean that the brothers had already laid hands on Joseph.

The ambiguity becomes a contradiction when Reuben exhorts his brothers to throw Joseph into a pit instead of "spilling [his] blood." But the brothers had planned to cast Joseph into the pit anyway: Reuben's substitute plan assumes that the brothers had not planned to abandon Joseph (dead or alive) in the pit. Moreover, verse 22 implies that the brothers had originally intended to slay Joseph with their own hands but acquiesced to Reuben's plea to let him die from deprivation in the pit. This turn of the story does not remove the contradiction but serves to oppose the alternative reading of verse 20, according to which the brothers conspire to murder Joseph by abandoning him alive in the pit. Of course, as the continuation of verse 22 informs us, it was Reuben's intention to deceive the brothers by removing Joseph from the pit surreptitiously. The intended deception of the brothers by Reuben thus stands as a foil to the brothers' intended (and successful) deception of their father.

By this point the reader should perceive a bifurcation in the narrative between two overlapping sequences of action: (a) the brothers decide to do away with Joseph by throwing him in the pit (alive or dead); (b) the brothers, heeding Reuben's advice, abandon a plan to slay Joseph themselves and throw him into the pit. The subsequent action—stripping Joseph of his robe, throwing him into the pit, and sitting down to dine—appears to be shared by both sequences. Thus, the bifurcated sequence converges from this point until verse 28, when a narrative sequence

opens that becomes incompatible with the action of the preceding three verses. Those verses note that the brothers sight a caravan of Ishmaelites and plan to sell Joseph to them instead of letting him die in the pit. This sequence corresponds closely to the characterization of the brothers in sequence (a) above. Namely, the brothers abandon one plan in which they are more directly responsible for Joseph's death for another plan (there Reuben's, here Judah's) in which they are less directly culpable. In fact, the language of the text reinforces such a reading. The brothers introduce their first plan with the word *l'khu w'nahargehu*—"Come, let-us-slay-him"—(verse 20). Judah's plan, the last one adopted by the brothers, parallels the language of the first, *l'khu w'nimk'rennu*—"Come, let-us-sell-him"—(verse 27). In addition, Judah's rationale, "Let not our hand be upon him," echoes Reuben's earlier exhortation, "Extend not a hand upon him," Reuben thinking he might rescue Joseph "from their hand." In addition, the formulation of the first and last schemes follows upon a *sighting* by the brothers (there of Joseph, here of the caravan).

But in verse 28 it is related that "Midianite trading men pass by, they pull and they raise Joseph out of the pit, and they sell Joseph to the Ishmaelites for twenty [units of] silver." A close reading of this verse reveals that it is ambiguous. Two readings converge on one clause, or, to put it differently, one clause is open to two readings. The clause in question is *wayyimk'ru 'et-yoseph layyishm'elim*—"they-sold Joseph to-the-Ishmaelites." According to the syntax of the verse, the verb *wayyimk'ru*, "they sold," follows as the fourth in a sequence of verbs of which "Midianite trading men" is the explicit subject. Therefore, the syntactic reading is: the Midianites sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites. However, the attentive reader is aware of another reading, which I call the "allusive" reading. The phrase *wayyimk'ru 'et-yoseph layyishm'elim*, "they-sold Joseph to-the Ishmaelites," only alludes to the words of Judah to his brothers: *l'khu w'nimk'rennu layyishm'elim*—"Come, let-us-sell-him to-the-Ishmaelites" (verse 27). With this association in mind, the reader can disregard the syntactic sequence and understand the subject of *wayyimk'ru*, "they-sold," in verse 28 to be Joseph's brothers.

In fact, various readers of our text have chosen between these

two readings and selected one or the other. Those with a more literary bent, seeking unity, have generally opted for the "syntactic" reading. Compare the following rendering by a contemporary novelist: "But Midianite traders passed, hauled and lifted Joseph up from the pit and sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver."³⁰ Bible scholars, seeking sources, have more often preferred the "allusive" reading. Compare, for example, this translation (a slash indicates a boundary between hypothetical sources): "Meanwhile, Midianite traders passed by, and they pulled Joseph up from the pit. / They [the understood subject is the brothers] sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver."³¹

In a faithful reading, the reader must be sensitive to both messages, leaving them both open. It can then be observed that the two simultaneous readings of "they-sold Joseph to-the-Ishmaelites" correspond to the two sequences that we have identified above and are now prepared to identify here. The "allusive" reading, according to which the brothers sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites, follows the (a) sequence: The brothers carry out the second substitute plan and sell Joseph to the Ishmaelites, who in turn sell Joseph in Egypt (37:28-36; 39:1). In a subordinated sequence, the brothers plan to deceive Jacob/Israel and then carry out their deception (37:32-34).

The "syntactic" reading, according to which the Midianites pull Joseph out of the pit, follows the (b) sequence: Reuben influences the brothers to leave Joseph in the pit, planning to remove Joseph and return him to Jacob/Israel; but the Midianites remove Joseph first, thereby frustrating Reuben's plan; the Midianites then sell Joseph in Egypt. The two sequences are summarized on the diagram on pages 124-25.

The final action in sequence (b) compels the reader to return to the ambiguous reading of "they-sold Joseph to-the-Ishmaelites" (verse 28) and select the "allusive" reading for the clause. This may require the reader to re-analyze the narrative sequence at that point,³² since the "syntactic" reading may have been assigned by the reader to the (b) sequence by default, while the "allusive" reading conforms to the (a) sequence. In any event, the clause "they-sold Joseph to-the-Ishmaelites" is equivocal in its context, that is, at that point in the narrative's self-disclosure to us. The

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equivocation in this clause is merely a *microcosm* for the equivocal effect created for the surrounding narrative of the sale of Joseph as a whole by the twofold sequence of action.

It should now be evident that within the narrative concerning the sale of Joseph there are two narrative sequences. At points the two sequences coincide, and at points they present incompatibilities in conflict with each other. Each, alternately, reaches for the reader's acceptance. The effect may be likened to an experience such as would be produced by viewing two films, partly different and partly the same, superimposed on a single screen.³³ Where the films are similar, a clear image would be seen as the frames from both films correspond. But where the films are divergent, the images would be confused and unintelligible; one film would obstruct the perception of the other. The chief difference between the two analogous experiences is that in viewing two superimposed films the blur is perceived immediately, while in reading two clear but contradictory narrative accounts, the "blur" is perceived upon reading the second account in trying to make sense of it in light of the preceding account.

Yet, a structure that is similar to the one that we find in the sale of Joseph episode may be found in the classic film *Rashomon* (1951), by the Japanese director Akira Kurosawa. In its core section the film presents the audience with five conflicting accounts of a crime of passion as told by five characters, three of them directly involved and two of them witnesses. The audience is never given the means by which to determine what had "objectively" occurred.³⁴

In our text, sequences (a) and (b) are conflicting or competing intelligibilities. The structure of the narrative, which juxtaposes components of sequence (a) with components of sequence (b), produces the very sense of ambiguity and conflict that is conveyed by the actions delineated within the two sequences. The two sequences are thus played off against each other in terms of narrative arrangement and action-sequence.

In sequence (a) the brothers are master of their machinations, selecting a plan for doing away with Joseph and ultimately attaining their end. In the subordinated sequence, they plan to deceive their father, and again they achieve the object of their designs. The degree of their attainment is signified in the text

through the language of Jacob/Israel's reaction to seeing the bloodied robe in verse 33. He duplicates verbatim the words that Joseph's brothers had construed in order to deceive their father (verse 20): "An evil beast has eaten him."

But sequence (b) provides an antithesis to sequence (a). Reuben sways his brothers from their original scheme, planning to rescue Joseph himself and deceive the brothers. But the Midianites catch them all unawares and foil Reuben and stymie the brothers by taking Joseph. (Since the continuation of the story requires that Joseph go down to Egypt, it is necessary that the brothers succeed to some degree and that Reuben fail.)

The effect of this juxtaposition is to produce an ongoing dialectic between the machinations of the brothers and the countermeasures of Reuben. The actions of each sequence are thereby blurred in the reader's *ultimate* perception. In terms of the narrative's action, the brothers' success in achieving their end in sequence (a) is compromised and delayed by the efforts of Reuben and the surprise appearance of the Midianites in sequence (b). The only actions that appear without obfuscation are those in which both sequences converge: The brothers plan to do away with Joseph . . . Joseph is thrown into a pit . . . Joseph is taken to Egypt by passing traders (of ambiguous identity) . . . (Jacob/Israel is led to believe that Joseph was killed by a wild animal).

In the larger context of the entire Joseph story, later references in the text continue to reinforce the equivocal reading of the sale of Joseph. When Joseph is imprisoned in Egypt, he tells his fellow inmates that he was "stolen from the land of the Hebrews" (40:15), which seems to correspond to the message in 37:28 that the Midianites "pulled and raised Joseph out of the pit." But when Joseph discloses his true identity to his brothers, he announces: "I am Joseph, your brother, whom you sold to Egypt" (45:4; cf. verse 5). This seems to conform to the "allusive" reading of 37:28, in which we understand that the brothers sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites. The two sequences, when visualized, vie with each other in their respective claims to intelligibility—like the conflicting testimonies in *Rashomon*—and have the effect of blurring our image of what happened. In the end, the reader cannot be certain of what human events actually took Joseph down to Egypt.

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But the story's ambiguity concerning the natural or human chain of events that led to Joseph's servitude in Egypt throws into bolder relief the actual "cause" of Joseph's fate. As Joseph himself explains to his brothers—and via the narrative to the reader—"Now it was not you who sent me here, but God" (45:8; cf. verses 5, 7). By blurring the human factors leading to the enslavement of Joseph, the narrative sharpens our image of the divine factor in bringing it about.

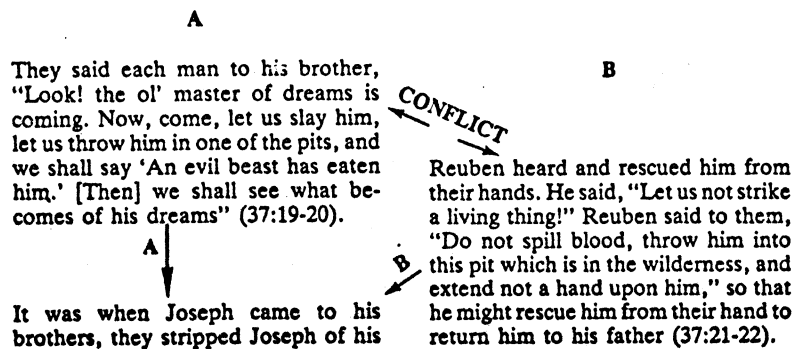
The brothers, who had denied divine providence by belittling Joseph's dreams (which in the ancient Near East in general and in our narrative in particular have the status of revelations), learn that Joseph's descent to Egypt was part of God's larger design.³⁵ An equivocal reading of the sale of Joseph leads to the realization that, in the view of our narrative, it is not crucial to our understanding of the story whether the brothers sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites or the Midianites kidnapped him. It is important, rather, to perceive that the descent of Joseph to Egypt and his subsequent rise to power there reveal divine providence in history. This, of course, is the single most pervasive theme in the Bible. But in our text the theme is evinced not only by the action of the narrative, but also, as I have tried to show, by the structural arrangement of the narrative. Somewhat simplified, one sequence of human action rivals the other, leaving only the divine manipulation of events clear and intelligible.

Epilogue

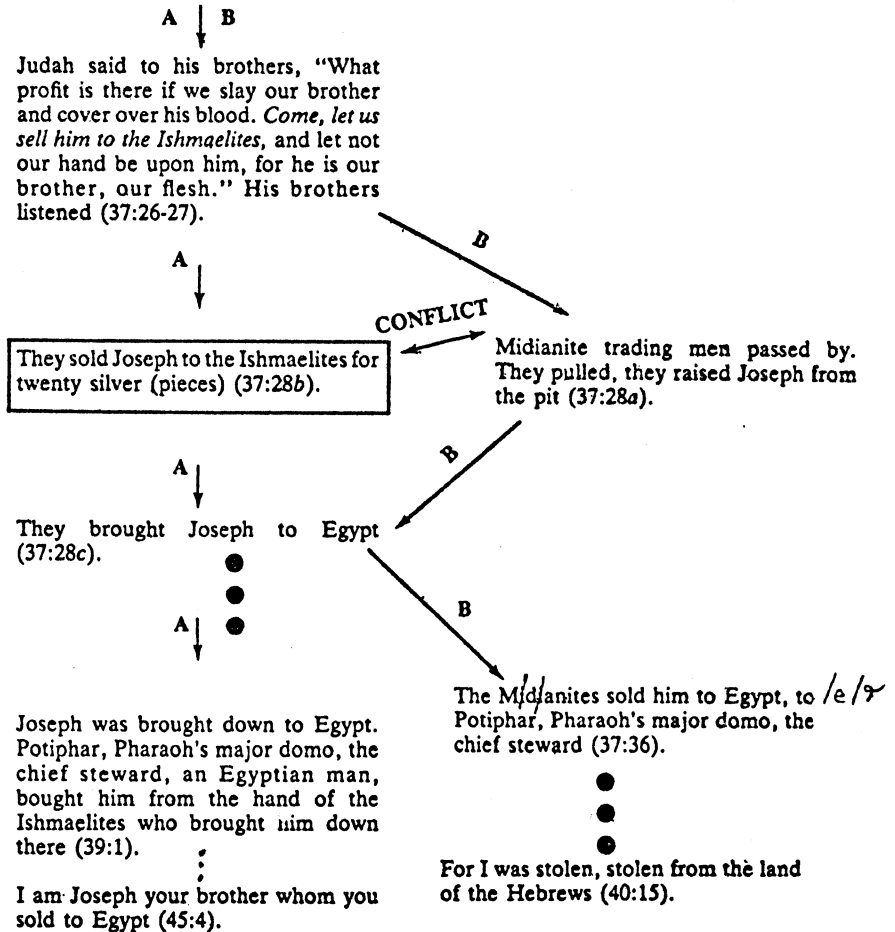
At first blush, it might seem that our reading of Genesis 37 discovers too sophisticated a narrative arrangement for the ancient Hebrews to have contrived. One may question whether our interpretation conforms to the stylistics of biblical storytelling or whether the redactor(s) of the Bible intended to convey the meaning we have found. In all honesty, we must plead agnosticism concerning the conscious, and certainly the unconscious, intentions of the biblical or any other author. Nevertheless, our reading receives strong support from the fact that a structure similar to the one we have analyzed in Genesis 37, producing a nearly identical effect and "message," can be recognized in Numbers 16. That

chapter combines into an overlapping sequence the stories of two rebellions against Moses, one by Korah and his followers and one by Dathan and Abiram. Verses 1-11 concern only the insurrection of Korah, and verses 12-14 mention only Dathan and Abiram. Moses' angry reaction in verse 15 seems to be directed against the latter pair, but in the following verse Moses addresses the former. In verse 23 the two groups are combined. The thrust of the story is to vindicate Moses as the sole legitimate leader of the Israelites, and toward that end Moses bids the earth to "open its mouth" and devour the rebels. The text then relates that the earth swallowed them up (verses 31-32), but "them" seems to refer to Dathan and Abiram as antecedents (see Verse 25). As the debacle is being narrated, the reader is often confused about precisely who is involved in what. But, as in Genesis 37, the ambiguity serves to blur our image of the rebels and focus on Moses, who stands triumphant when the dust clears.

In the foregoing I have not endeavored to present a complete, proper "close reading," structural analysis, or thematic interpretation of Genesis 37, although I have enlisted these methods where I felt them to be profitable. What I have tried to do is fundamental to such study: to expose the multiplicity of readings within the text and the design of the literary arrangement. My analysis begins to suggest a collaboration in the narrative between action and structure, which in their interaction help to produce "meaning." I also hope that the example of my analysis may help advance the development of methodologies for the literary reading of "composite," inconsistent texts, of which there are several in the Bible.³⁶



robe. . . . They threw him into the pit, the pit being empty, there was no water in it. They sat down to eat food, they lifted their eyes and saw, and look! a caravan of Ishmaelites was coming from Gilead . . . (37:23-25).



13. See F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1955), p. 87: "'et expresses closer association than 'im"—comparing I Sam. 14:17—Saul's "Who has gone from those about us [*mē 'immānū*]"—with Gen. 44:28—Jacob's "and the one has gone from with me [*mē 'ittī*]."
 14. Cf. Exod. 2:14; Judg. 9:7-15; I Sam. 8, etc.
 15. H. Gunkel, *Genesis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1917), p. 401; G. Von Rad, *Genesis*, pp. 348-49; E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964), pp. 293-94; B. Vawter, *On Genesis: A New Reading* (Doubleday, 1977), pp. 386-87.
 16. Redford, pp. 132-35.
 17. Cf. Exod. 21:16; Deut. 24:7. M. Greenberg, "Some Postulates of Biblical Criminal Law," in J. Goldin, ed., *The Jewish Expression* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), pp. 24-29, demonstrates that biblical law, in distinction from Babylonian or Hittite, prescribes the death penalty for murder and prohibits the death penalty for theft. Since kidnapping involved selling a person into slavery, Israelite law treated it as a form of murder.
 18. Leibowitz, pp. 396-97.
 19. "The Youngest Son or Where Does Genesis 38 Belong?" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 96 (1977): 27-44.
 20. Cf. II Sam. 3:7-11; 16:20-23; I Kings 2:22.
 21. "The Youngest Son," pp. 38-40.
 22. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
 23. *Ibid.*, esp. pp. 38-42.
 24. "A Literary Approach to the Bible," *Commentary* 60 (1975): 70-77.
 25. "Paradox and Symmetry in the Joseph Narrative," in *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives*, ed. K. R. R. Gros Louis, with J. S. Ackerman and T. S. Warsaw (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974), pp. 67-69.
 26. *Ibid.*, 62-64.
 27. Jer. 37:16.
 28. My interpretation of Gen. 49:8-12 is following the general lines of E. M. Good, "The 'Blessing' on Judah, Gen. 49:8-12," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 82 (1963): 427-32, although I do not agree with Good's conclusion that the poem in its present setting is a polemic against Judah. Cf. also C. Carmichael, "Some Sayings in Gen. 49," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88 (1969): 435-44.
 29. Job 31:10; perhaps Judg. 5:27 is playing on this connotation in describing Sisera's encounter with Jael.
 30. The Hebrew term for "staff" in Gen. 49:10 is not the same as in Gen. 38:18, 25; but both terms occur in poetic parallelism in Isa. 14:5 and Ezek. 19:11, 14.
 31. Carmichael, "Some Sayings in Gen. 49," 441-42.
 32. *Ibid.*
 33. The Hebrew text (*'ad kī yābō' šlō*) is very problematic.
 34. "Joseph and His Brothers," *Commentary* 65 (1980): 59-69.
 35. *Ibid.*, esp. pp. 59-61, 69.
 36. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

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1. Versions of this study were presented at the Columbia University Hebrew Bible Seminar (December, 1979) and at the annual meeting of the American

- Academy of Religion in Dallas, Texas (November, 1980). I wish to thank in particular William Herbrechtsmeier, David Marcus, Alan Mintz, and Thayer Warsaw for their helpful suggestions, and the Abbell Research Fund of the Jewish Theological Seminary for helping to support the preparation of this study. Throughout this essay, I use my own translation from the Hebrew.
2. That the text employs both the names "Jacob" (37:1, 2, 34) and "Israel" (37:3, 13) is attributed by source-criticism to two hypothetical documents from which our text appears to have been composed. One document used the name "Jacob," the other "Israel." Whatever the validity of this explanation based on the analysis of sources, from a literary perspective this explanation is irrelevant. Since the text is a literary whole—however it was composed—shifting between the two names of the patriarch may now carry literary significance. Literary analysis of the entire chapter demonstrates that there is more at work here than an author's "desire for literary variety" (Donald B. Redford, *A Study of the Biblical Story of Joseph, Venus Testamentum Supplement 20* [Leiden, 1970], 106; so, too, M. H. Segal, "The Composition of the Pentateuch," in Chaim Rabin, ed., *Studies in the Bible, Scripta Hierosolymitana 8* [Jerusalem, 1961], 90). Briefly stated, a theme running through the entire story, most intensely perhaps in chap. 37, is the dialectic between what is and what will be, reality and destiny (as, for example, in the dreams). Now, once we recall from preceding narratives that the name "Jacob" connotes the scheming man of this world while "Israel" connotes the man of vision and destiny, who had "striven with God and with men and prevailed" (Gen. 32:28), we may perceive the dialectic of reality/destiny in the alternation "Jacob"/"Israel."
 3. Cf. Burke O. Long, "Recent Field Studies in Oral Literature and Their Bearing on OT Criticism," *Venus Testamentum* 26 (1976): 187-98, esp. 194-95.
 4. Redford, *A Study of the Biblical Story of Joseph*, p. 106.
 5. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 140ff.; Samuel Sandmel, *The Enjoyment of Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 113.
 6. Cf., e.g., Zvi Adar, *Teaching the Joseph Story* (Jerusalem, 1966), p. 9, n. 1 (in Hebrew); Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), p. 214.
 7. See, e.g., O. S. Wintermute, "Joseph Son of Jacob," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 983b: "Gen. 37 is one of the most convincing illustrations of the 'documentary hypothesis'"; cf. recently Bruce Vawter, *On Genesis* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977), pp. 386-87.
 8. E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, Anchor Bible #1 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964), p. 293; cf. W. F. Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan* (Doubleday, 1968), p. 39: "It is most improbable that the original editors of the Pentateuch can have left such an obvious discrepancy standing." For a recent description of the source-critical analysis of Genesis 37, see Alan W. Jenks, *The Elohist and North Israelite Traditions*, Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series 22 (Missoula, Montana, 1977), esp. pp. 27-29.
 9. Cf. Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. A. Lavers and C. Smith (New York: Hill & Wang, 1968), p. 58: "In actual fact, clarity is a purely rhetorical attribute, not a quality of language in general, which is possible at all times and in all places, but only the ideal appendage to a certain type of discourse, that which is given over to a permanent intention to persuade."
 10. E. G., Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 214, who ignores the statement in verse 28 relating that the Midianites pulled Joseph out of the pit. Troubled by the

apparent discrepancies, George W. Coats removes the Midianites from the story altogether by hypothesizing that the mention of the Midianites was interpolated into the narrative by a later hand (*From Canaan to Egypt: Structural and Theological Context for the Joseph Story* [Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1976], pp. 17, 61). This is also the reading of Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice for their rock operetta *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*.

11. E.g., Donald A. Seybold, "Paradox and Symmetry in the Joseph Narrative," in Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis, et al., eds., *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), pp. 60-61; Mary Savage, "Literary Criticism and Biblical Studies: A Rhetorical Analysis of the Joseph Narrative," in C. C. Evans, et al., eds., *Scripture in Context*, Pittsburgh Theological Monograph Series #34 (Pittsburgh, 1980), pp. 79-100.
12. Cf. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, p. 214; Sandmel, *The Enjoyment of Scripture*, p. 111. See already the commentary of the medieval exegete Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra; but contrast the commentary of his older contemporary Rashi, who perceived that these Midianites are not Ishmaelites and that the text refers to more than one sale.
13. Shemaryahu Talmon sees the alternation "Ishmaelite"/"Midianite" as "but an instance of (stylistic) variation" ("The Presentation of Synchronicity and Simultaneity in Biblical Narratives," in J. Hejmann and S. Werses, eds., *Studies in Hebrew Narrative Art*, Scripta Hierosolymitana 27 [Jerusalem, 1978], pp. 9-26, here p. 19). However, such a reading ignores the divergent references to these groups, as I explain below.
14. The narrative sequence in chap. 37 is interrupted by the episode involving Judah and Tamar in chap. 38, after which chap. 39 opens with a resumption of the action at the end of chap. 37. Such a "resumptive repetition" has been characterized as a typical feature of biblical narrative, for which see Talmon, "The Presentation of Synchronicity," with reference to our case on p. 18 (see preceding note), and cf. G. W. Coats, "Redactional Unity in Genesis 37-50," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93 (1974): 15-21, esp. 16, n. 2.
15. Benno Jacob has tried to get around this contradiction by interpreting "to Egypt" in 37:36 to mean the Ishmaelites (*The First Book of the Bible: Genesis*, abridged, ed., and trans. E. I. Jacob and W. Jacob [New York: Ktav, 1974], p. 255). But his attempt is hardly convincing. In order to avoid finding any contradiction in this episode, one would have to interpret the passage in a manner like that of Isaac Caro, a fifteenth-century Spanish rabbi, in his commentary *Sefer Toledot Yitzhaq*. According to Caro, the brothers instructed the Midianites to remove Joseph from the pit and sell him on their behalf to the Ishmaelites. After this sale, the Midianites accompanied the Ishmaelites to Egypt, where the Ishmaelites asked the Midianites to sell Joseph to Potiphar for them. Thus, for Caro, 39:1 means that Potiphar purchased Joseph from the ownership of the Ishmaelites, not from them directly. Needless to say, such a reading goes far beyond the limits of the text itself.
16. Edwin M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965), p. 107; cf. Eric I. Lowenthal, *The Joseph Narrative in Genesis* (New York: Ktav, 1973), pp. 27-28.
17. See the title essay of Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1966), pp. 3-14.
18. Cf. Louis Z. Hammer, "The Relevance of Buber's Thought to Aesthetics," in Paul A. Schilpp and M. Friedman, eds., *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*

(LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1967), esp. p. 627. This phenomenological approach to literature has received extended articulation recently in the works of Stanley Fish and Wolfgang Iser. For bibliography and discussion of Fish, see William Ray, "Supersession and the Subject: A Reconsideration of Stanley Fish's 'Affective Stylistics,'" *Diacritics* 8/3 (Fall, 1978): 60-71. And see Iser's *The Implied Reader* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1974) and *The Act of Reading* (Johns Hopkins Press, 1978).

19. See in particular his "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives," *Image/Music/Text*, trans. S. Heath (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1977), pp. 79-124; *Elements of Semiology*, trans. A. Lavers and C. Smith (New York: Jonathan Cape, 1968); and *S/Z*, trans. R. Miller (New York: Hill & Wang, 1974).
20. R. Barthes, "The Struggle with the Angel," in Barthes, et al., eds., *Structural Analysis and Biblical Exegesis*, Pittsburgh Theological Monograph Series #3 (Pittsburgh, 1974), pp. 21-33 = *Image/Music/Text*, pp. 125-41. For a discussion of this study by Barthes, see Hugh C. White, "French Structuralism and OT Narrative Analysis: Roland Barthes," *Semeia* 3 (1975): 99-127.
21. Barthes, *Image/Music/Text*, pp. 140-41.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 131.
23. Cf. e.g., Joel Rosenberg, "Meanings, Morals, and Mysteries: Literary Approaches to Torah," *Response* 26 (1975): 67-94, esp. 83ff. Additional supporting evidence is presented in the Epilogue to this essay.
24. We would only want to eliminate scribal errors in the transmission of the text since the time at which the text was integrated.
25. In the article by B. O. Long referred to above in n. 2, it is made clear that "repetitions, doublets, false starts, digressions, rough transitions and the like, so dear to the heart of biblical critics" (p. 195) are in fact characteristic of orally recited prose narrative in various illiterate cultures. They are also common in mythology in general and in ancient Near Eastern literature, too. Thus, even if the present form of our biblical text comes to us through a process of literary redaction, its form may be regarded as conforming to the conventions of its culture.
26. Cf., e.g., the studies cited above in notes 5, 6, and 11. So also Jacob Licht, *Storytelling in the Bible* (Jerusalem, 1978), pp. 70-71, in discussing the story of Balaam (Numbers 22-24). In that narrative the text presents what appear as contradictory behaviors on God's part. On the one hand, God encourages Balaam to go on his mission (Num. 22:20), but on the other, God attempts to block his way (22:22ff.). Because he can make no sense of the story, Licht resorts to source criticism, attributing the contradictory statements to different genetic origins. But, of course, this does nothing to assist the reader to experience this text rather than the hypothetical sources of this text. Here, too, we would recognize the Bible's logic as "metonymic," or thematic, rather than linear, or sequential. In this way we may infer that through relating God's conflicting actions, the text conveys the sense that God is ambivalent about how to thwart Balaam—by preventing him from going in the first place, or by allowing him to go but transforming his words of execration into blessings. For a complementary approach to the story of Balaam, see now Alexander Rofé, *The Book of Balaam* (Jerusalem, 1979; in Hebrew).
27. Cf. Barthes, *S/Z*, p. 213.
28. The preceding passage describing Joseph's naïve zeal in seeking out his brothers is one of the most ironic in the Bible. Surprisingly, the irony seems to

- have eluded such sensitive readers as Good (*Irony in the Old Testament*) and Redford (*A Study of the Biblical Story of Joseph*, esp. pp. 144-45); cf. now Licht, *Storytelling in the Bible*, p. 48.
29. The combination of verbs here does not necessarily reflect a chronological sequence. They may have intended to kill him and then cast him into the pit, but the pronominal suffix on the verb "to throw" seems to refer to a live Joseph. The verbs may well mean "Let us kill him by throwing him into the pit." One finds a similar combination of verbs without implying chronological order in Gen. 34:2, where "he took her, he lay with her, he forced/humbled her" may mean either he lay with her and thereby humbled her (the Revised Standard Version) or he forced her to lie with him (the New Jewish Version).
 30. Reynolds Price, *A Palpable God* (New York: Atheneum, 1978), p. 127; cf. Benno Jacob, *The First Book of the Bible*.
 31. Speiser, *Genesis*, p. 289; cf. his commentary on p. 291. Cf. also Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, trans. J. Marks, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), p. 348; Jenks, *The Elohist and North Israelite Traditions*, p. 28.
 32. For re-analysis in biblical poetry, with reference to music, visual art, and other literature, see my "Two Variations of Grammatical Parallelism in Canaanite Poetry and Their Psycholinguistic Background," *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society of Columbia University* 6 (1974), esp. 97-101; and "One More Step on the Staircase," *Ugarit-Forschungen* 9 (1977): 77-86. For the phenomenon in general, see Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Poetic Closure* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).
 33. Interestingly enough, Freud refers to the technique of projecting "two images on to a single plate, so that certain features common to both are emphasized, while those which fail to fit in with one another cancel each other out and are indistinct in the picture" (*The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. and ed. James Strachey [New York: Discus Books, 1965], p. 328 [VI.A.iii]).
 34. I thank Dr. Blossom Feinstein for calling this parallel to mind. For a discussion of the film, see Parker Tyler, "Rashomon as Modern Art," in Julius Bellone, ed., *Renaissance of the Film* (New York and Toronto: Collier, 1970), pp. 198-210.
 35. See, e.g., Seybold, "Paradox and Symmetry in the Joseph Narrative," pp. 71-73; Licht, *Storytelling in the Bible*, pp. 139-40.
 36. As an illustration of a notable advance in this direction, see Bernhard W. Anderson, "From Analysis to Synthesis: The Interpretation of Genesis 1-11," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 97 (1978): 23-39. In an article on the Joseph story published too recently to be incorporated into the body of my discussion, Robert Alter also deals with the literary interpretation of the conflicting sequences surrounding Joseph's removal to Egypt; "Joseph and His Brothers," *Commentary* 75/5 (November, 1980): 59-69. Alter proposes that the juxtaposition of the Ishmaelite and Midianite versions "suggests that selling (Joseph) into Egypt is a virtual murder and thus undermines Judah's claim that by selling the boy the brothers will avoid the horror of blood guilt" (p. 64b). This is fairly close to part of my own analysis, but I think Alter's interpretation wrongly confines itself to the episode at hand since the ambiguity concerning the circumstances of Joseph's descent to Egypt persists in the continuation of the story. My reading has the additional virtue of relating the sale-of-Joseph episode to an overarching theme of the entire narrative.

8. The Unity of Genesis

1. Another version of this essay was previously published in *Theology Digest*, vol. 24, no. 4 (winter, 1976), pp. 360-67.
2. Such "literary heterogeneity" consists of *duplications* of narrative accounts, with substantial *variations* and even *contradictions* in details between the duplicates, as well as *differences in the names of the Deity*, marked *differences in language and writing styles*, and much else. Examples can be found in a comparison of the two creation stories (1:1-2:4a with 2:4b-3:24); the two genealogies, in 4:17-26 and 5:1-31; the two promises of Isaac's birth, in 17:1-27 and 18:1-15; and many other instances in Genesis. What is *most* significant is that any one of these points of comparison correlates with all the others. That is, where we encounter a duplicate narrative, there also the language style changes, the name favored for Deity changes, and so on. Each feature changes *in phase* with the others. This is not the same phenomenon as the litany-like repetitions we find in ancient oral composition as such. The evidence cited and much else like it suggests diverse narrative traditions in Genesis *whether* oral or written.
3. The distinction between narrative strands in Genesis is a simplification, for this particular discussion, of what is known to several generations of biblical scholarship as the "Documentary Hypothesis" concerning the composition of Genesis and the rest of the first six books of the Bible. Some form of this hypothesis seems to me inescapable for an understanding of the history of that composition; that such a view does not fragment the book is part of the argument of this essay.
4. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973), p. 13.
5. George W. Coats, *From Canaan to Egypt: Structural and Theological Context for the Joseph Story*, Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series, No. 4 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1976), p. 73. See also p. 79.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

10. Samson's Dry Bones

1. *Religio Medici*, Sec. 21, ed. L. C. Martin (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 21.
2. A reader who wishes other references to these standard theories may consult with profit F. Michael Krouse, *Milton's Samson and the Christian Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949). I supply the following samples of traditional exegesis, which he does not mention, to orient readers whose primary interest is modern studies. They are necessarily brief.
Literal: Samson is said to be a sociopolitical figure who lived in a relatively restricted geographical area (about twenty square miles), was a Danite, and gained a reputation for strength. Eusebius' *Chronicle* claims he lived eight hundred years after Abraham (summarized in Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* [Princeton University Press, 1964], p. 161). His career is fully given by Judges, but restated by many subsequent literalists (e.g., Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 5.8; Sulpitius Severus, *The Sacred History*