

Joseph's Elevation and the Authenticity of the Narrative—NS

The biblical narrative describes Joseph's elevation to high office, his duties and his titles, with an unusual wealth of detail. Scholars are thus in the fortunate and rare position of being enabled to examine this story in the light of the considerable body of accumulated knowledge about the government and court of the Pharaohs.

It is clear at once that Scripture here exhibits an extraordinary degree of familiarity with Egyptian customs. The multiplicity of titles and functions assigned to Joseph corresponds fully to the known Egyptian penchant for the generous distribution of honors and titles to officials of the great bureaucracy. Some might boast of a dozen or more titles, some real, some purely ornamental and prestigious. This curiosity has to be borne in mind together with the fact that the duties and titles assumed by Joseph were not exclusive to the Egyptian vizierate. We do not know beyond the shadow of a doubt that Joseph was actually appointed Grand Vizier of Egypt, although he certainly penetrated the ranks of the highest nobility of the land and was one of the most important officials in the government.

Joseph was placed in charge of the palace, which probably means that he was given control over the king's personal estates. This would correspond to the titles "Great Steward of the Lord of the Two Lands," "The Great Chief in the Palace." When Pharaoh told Joseph, "only with respect to the throne shall I be superior to you" (41.40).

It meant that he was to report directly to the king. This was a prerogative shared by several officials, some of whom had such colorful titles as "Great Favorite of the Lord of the Two Lands," "Foremost among his courtiers," "Great One in the Palace."

Joseph was further placed in charge of all the land of Egypt, a function that accords with the appellation "Chief of the Entire Land." As a symbol of the delegation of authority, Pharaoh handed Joseph the royal seal. The reference is certainly to the title "Royal Seal-Bearer," borne by viziers as well as other high officials. As to His Majesty putting "the chain of gold" around his neck, this is a well-known Egyptian symbol of investiture, one of the highest distinctions the king could bestow.

One other title held by Joseph is also known to us from Egyptian sources. When Joseph discloses his true identity to his brothers, he describes himself, among other things, as "father to Pharaoh." This is the equivalent of an Egyptian title "God's Father," in which "God" refers to the living king [who were believed to be the earthly manifestation of the gods themselves, most often of Re, the chief god].

Joseph's chief task was to lay up an adequate store of food during the years of plenty and to be responsible for its distribution during the years of famine. It is one of those strange quirks of history that the shepherd boy, a member of a semi-nomadic clan, should become Secretary of Agriculture, and perhaps Joseph's first dream, dealing with binding sheaves in the field, contained a hint of his future vocation. At any rate, it is certain that he assumed one of the well-known Egyptian titles, "Overseer of the Granaries of the Upper and Lower Egypt." The holder of this office was also responsible for the collection of tax payments on field produce, which is precisely one of the functions that Joseph performed[, according to our text].

Not so simple is the change of Joseph's name to *Tzafnat-paneach*. This is indeed in conformity with the tendency of Asiatics in Egypt to adopt Egyptian names. An Egyptian inventory of Semitic slaves clearly illustrates this process. Further, Joseph's new name is good Egyptian and means, "the god has spoken and he (the bearer of the name) shall live." The difficulty is, however, that this type of name does not appear in Egyptian sources before the 12th century B.C.E., long after the Exodus period. The same problem exists in relation to the name *As'nat*, borne by Joseph's wife. It means, "she belongs to (the goddess) Neith." The name itself has not yet been found, but the type was current from the 8th century B.C.E. Here, again, we shall have to await further evidence before deciding finally upon the critical implications of this data.

Joseph married into the elite of the nobility. His father-in-law was none other than *Poti-phaera*, High Priest of On. This city was the great cultic center of the sun-god, Re. Hence, it was variously known as "the House of

Re,” “Bet Shemesh” in Hebrew and Heliopolis in Greek. The word On is a Hebraized form of an Egyptian word Iwni, which means “a column,” the name of the city deriving from its most outstanding architectural features, columns and colonnades. The High Priest of On held the exalted title, “Greatest of Seers,” and it is quite appropriate that he should have been called Poti-phera meaning, as previously explained, “He whom Re has given.”

The question might well be raised as to whether a foreigner could really have risen to such high office in the Egyptian government. This problem can be answered with an emphatic affirmative. From the time of the famous king Akhenaton, we know of a Semite named Yanhamu who was Egyptian commissioner for Palestine and Syria. Under Merneptah, a certain Ben-Ozen, who came from a place situated east of Lake Tiberius, rose to become the royal herald or marshal at the court, and received two Egyptian names from the king, while a brother of Merneptah had been given in marriage by his father Rameses II to the daughter of a Syrian sea captain named Ben-Anat. It was not at all extraordinary for foreigners, and Semites in particular, to be welcomed by the court and to rise to positions of responsibility and power in the government.

Attention must now be drawn to two tendencies that our narrative has very delicately opposed one against the other. On the one hand, the foreign origins of Joseph are constantly emphasized. The Egyptians with whom he comes in contact are always aware of them. Potiphar’s wife sneeringly calls him “a Hebrew,” Joseph tells the cupbearer that he was kidnapped “from the land of the Hebrews,” the cupbearer describes Joseph to Pharaoh as “a Hebrew youth,” the Egyptians did not eat with Joseph because their particularistic religion forbade them to dine with Hebrews.

Against this external counterpressure to assimilation is opposed an inner drive towards Egyptianization on the part of Joseph. His outer garb, his changed name, his marriage to a daughter of the High Priest of Re, and his mastery of the Egyptian language were all calculated to make him outwardly indistinguishable from his fellow Egyptians, and although they could not accept Joseph wholeheartedly as their equal, he was yet, apparently, so thoroughly satisfied with his situation that he preferred not to be reminded of his past. He expresses this most clearly in the names he gives to his two sons.

Joseph named the first-born Menasheh, meaning, “God has made me forget completely my hardship and my parental home.” And the second he named Efrayim, meaning, “God has made me fertile in the land of my affliction.”

It is just when this point has been reached that Joseph’s brothers appear once again on the scene.

A Man in Conflict—WGP

The attempts by older traditions to portray Joseph as a persistently noble character do injustice to the text and to its artistry.

Thirteen years as a slave, even though at times a privileged one, left their mark on the young man. He had been his father’s favorite, a pampered youth, who told tales on his brothers and who overwhelmed his family with his ambitious dreams. But the trauma of near-death and his subsequent sale into slavery apparently brought on a profound change. Gone were the “coat of many colors” and with it the easy arrogance. Bitterness over his lot, then a brief period of success followed by temptation and by imprisonment with long hours of solitude—all these combined to bring out Joseph’s latent powers. The gifted son of Jacob developed a sense of humility, and with it his basic qualities of religious sentiment began to emerge.

Joseph was the first Hebrew who lived, so to speak, in Diaspora (in galut). He became thoroughly assimilated, adopted the customs of his environment, changed his name, wore Egyptian clothes, swore by Pharaoh’s name (Genesis 42.15), and married an Egyptian wife. In Potiphar’s house and in prison he was still “the Hebrew”; as an Egyptian official, he became wholly Egyptian. He entered a new life of affluence and power, and the past seemed far away. He was moved to call his first-born “Menasheh” because “God has made me forget all the troubles I endured in [or “and”] my father’s house” (Genesis 41.51).

The forgetting, of course, was only on the surface, in his everyday life. His past would not and could not go away. He would have been less than human if he did not think how someday he would let his brothers know of his great position, put them to shame, and arouse their envy. But why did he not communicate with his father? Why did he not make inquiry through Pharaoh's subordinates in Canaan whether Jacob was still alive?

This failure hints at a severely strained relationship between son and father. Jacob doubtless loved Rachel's first-born son with a fierce and possessive love. He saw in Joseph (as he would later in Benjamin) a surrogate for Rachel, his dead wife. It is altogether possible that the multicolored tunic may have served to feminize young Joseph who, according to a midrash, curled his hair and painted his eyebrows. The boy must have suffered deep agony in this intense relationship, and when he was separated from his father, he must have found it easier to suppress the memory of Jacob than to face it with maturity.

The turning point came with the sudden appearance of his brothers. At first, and understandably, Joseph thought of revenge, but when he saw them from his new and elevated position, he glimpsed them—perhaps for the first time in his life—as human beings in need of help, as brothers. And now, inevitably, he had to think of his father.

Literary artistry here introduces a delay that heightens suspense and reflects Joseph's own inner conflict. He still wants revenge more than he wants love, and so he proceeds to imprison the most aggressive of his brothers and to subject his father to the severest trial: giving up his new Rachel-substitute, the beloved Benjamin.

Only after this will the final act of the drama emerge. Only after this will Joseph have reached his full potential and be able to say, "I am Joseph" and "is my father still alive?" (Genesis 45.3).

Understanding and Wise—REF

Some interpreters identify the Joseph story as a wisdom tale. It is treated as comparable to wisdom tales from numerous cultures about a wise young man who is successful in a royal court because of his cleverness. The story of Mordecai in the book of Esther and the story of Daniel are compared in this context, as well.

I would caution that there is a danger here of over-defining the word "wisdom."

The term was commonly used to refer to the books of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes, works similar to philosophy; composed, like the pre-Socratics, in poetry; sometimes set in very loose story contexts (Job, Ecclesiastes), but basically dealing with issues outright, not developing them through a prose narrative fabric.

Now, in the first place, if we redefine wisdom to include the Joseph cycle, and thus the books of Daniel and Esther, we shall be forced to include a number of other comparable sections of the Hebrew Bible under this heading, as well. We shall be left with a category of works with more elements of variety than commonality (Ecclesiastes and Esther?), and the term "wisdom" will be rendered less descriptive and useful.

Second, the facts of the Joseph story do not really fit this model in any case. Joseph is not successful initially because of his cleverness or his sage advice. He succeeds because he can interpret dreams, apparently by revelation rather than by his own insight, since even the most brilliant Freudian analyst would be unlikely to guess that a dream of cows eating cows means that there will be prosperity followed by famine in the Near East.

Joseph is described as stating that it is God and not he who directs events and sheds light on dreams (40.8; 41.16,25; 50.20). One might suggest that this story is still based on the wisdom tale model but has been adapted to fit the biblical author's literary and theological requirements.

That would be an interesting phenomenon to pursue, but it would be a study of adaptation, not of wisdom. To understand biblical wisdom, we are better advised to study wisdom literature as it has classically been understood: Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes.

MIKETZ (B'reishit 41:1–44:17)

Chapter 41

¹ After two years' time, Pharaoh dreamed that he was standing by the Nile, ² when out of the Nile there came up seven cows, handsome and sturdy, and they grazed in the reed grass. ³ But presently, seven other cows came up from the Nile close behind them, ugly and gaunt [*foul to look at and meager in flesh—RA*], and stood beside the cows on the bank of the Nile; ⁴ and the ugly gaunt cows ate up the seven handsome sturdy cows. And Pharaoh awoke.

⁵ He fell asleep and dreamed a second time: Seven ears of grain, solid and healthy, grew on a single stalk. ⁶ But close behind them sprouted seven ears, thin and scorched [*blasted—RA*] by the east wind. ⁷ And the thin ears swallowed up the seven solid and full cars. Then Pharaoh awoke: it was a dream!

⁸ Next morning, his spirit was agitated, and he sent for all the magicians of Egypt, and all its wise men; and Pharaoh told them his dreams, but none could interpret them for Pharaoh.

⁹ The chief cupbearer then spoke up and said to Pharaoh, "I must make mention today of my offenses. ¹⁰ Once Pharaoh was angry with his servants, and placed me in custody in the house of the chief steward, together with the chief baker. ¹¹ We had dreams the same night, he and I, each of us a dream with a meaning of its own. ¹² A Hebrew youth was there with us, a servant of the chief steward; and when we told him our dreams, he interpreted them for us, telling each of the meaning of his dream [*according to the interpretation of his dream—EF; with its own solution—RA*]. ¹³ And as he interpreted for us, so it came to pass: I was restored to my post, and the other was impaled [*hanged—REF, EF, CS*]."

¹⁴ Thereupon Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and he was rushed from the dungeon. He had his hair cut and changed his clothes, and he appeared before Pharaoh. ¹⁵ And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I have had a dream, but no one can interpret it. Now I have heard it said of you that for you to hear a dream is to tell its meaning." ¹⁶ Joseph answered Pharaoh, saying, "Not !! God will see to Pharaoh's welfare."

¹⁷ Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "In my dream, I was standing on the bank of the Nile, ¹⁸ when out of the Nile came up seven sturdy and well-formed cows and grazed in the reed grass. ¹⁹ Presently there followed them seven other cows, scrawny, ill-formed [*poor, truly repulsive—CS; wretched and exceedingly ill of form—EF*], and emaciated—never

[RA] 1: As this story set in the pharaonic court unfolds, its Egyptian local color is brought out by a generous sprinkling of Egyptian loanwords in the Hebrew narrative: "Nile" (*ye'or*), "soothsayers" (*tartumim*), "rushes" (*achu*), "ring" (*taba'at*), "fine linen" (*shesh*).

[NS] 8: None could interpret them for Pharaoh. It is inconceivable that the professional dream interpreters are unable to provide "interpretations." The failure of the Egyptian professional dream interpreters has a significance that reaches far beyond the immediate story. This incident—the first clash recorded in the Bible between pagan magic and the will of God—constitutes a polemic against paganism. The same motif recurs in the contest between Moses and Aaron and the court magicians of Egypt in Exodus 7-9, in the story of Balaam in Numbers 22-23, and in Daniel.

[RA] 6: blasted by the east wind. The desert lies to the east, and the wind that blows from there (the chamsin) is hot and parching.

[RA] 9. I recall. The verb means both "to mention" and "to cause to remember" and so is linked with the theme of remembrance and forgetting that is central both to this episode and to the larger Joseph story.

[JSB] 14: For the fourth time, Joseph's clothes are changed, this time (like the first) as a sign of elevation.

[RA] 19: In keeping with the biblical convention of near verbatim repetition, Pharaoh, in recounting his dreams to Joseph, uses virtually the same words that the narrator used in first reporting them. The piquant difference is that his language underlines his own sense of horror at what he has seen in his dream. The comment in verse 21 about the unchanging lean look of the cows after swallowing their fat predecessors again reflects Pharaoh's horrified perspective.

Guide to the Translators and Commentators used here

EF: Everett Fox **REF:** Richard Elliott Friedman **RA:** Robert Alter **NS:** Nahum Sarna **CS:** Chaim Stern **JSB:** Jewish Study Bible
SRH: Samson Raphael Hirsch **RASHI:** Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak **OJPS:** Old Jewish Publication Society version
WGP: W. Gunther Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* **TWC:** *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*

had I seen their likes for ugliness in all the land of Egypt! ²⁰ And the seven lean and ugly cows ate up the first seven cows, the sturdy ones; ²¹ but when they had consumed them, one could not tell that they had consumed them, for they looked just as bad as before [and they were taken into their bellies and you could not tell that they had come into their bellies, for their looks were as foul as before—RA; they entered their body, etc.—EF; once they had digested them, etc.—CS]. And I awoke. ²² In my other dream, I saw seven ears of grain, full and healthy, growing on a single stalk; ²³ but right behind them sprouted seven ears, shriveled, thin, and scorched by the east wind. ²⁴ And the thin ears swallowed the seven healthy ears. I have told my magicians [soothsayer-priests—CS; soothsayers—RA], but none has an explanation for me.”

²⁵ And Joseph said to Pharaoh, “Pharaoh’s dreams are one and the same: God has told Pharaoh what He is about to do. ²⁶ The seven healthy cows are seven years, and the seven healthy ears are seven years; it is the same dream. ²⁷ The seven lean and ugly cows that followed are seven years, as are also the seven empty ears scorched by the east wind; they are seven years of famine. ²⁸ It is just as I have told Pharaoh: God has revealed to Pharaoh what He is about to do. ²⁹ Immediately ahead are seven years of great abundance in all the land of Egypt. ³⁰ After them will come seven years of famine, and all the abundance in the land of Egypt will be forgotten. As the land is ravaged by famine, ³¹ no trace of the abundance will be left in the land because of the famine thereafter, for it will be very severe. ³² As for Pharaoh having had the same dream twice, it means that the matter has been determined by God, and that God will soon carry it out [God is hurrying to do it—REF].

³³ “Accordingly, let Pharaoh find a man of discernment and wisdom, and set him over the land of Egypt. ³⁴ And let Pharaoh take steps to appoint overseers over the land, and organize [meaning of Heb. uncertain; others translate as ‘take a fifth part of’] the land of Egypt in the seven years of plenty. ³⁵ Let all the food of these good years that are coming be gathered, and let the grain be collected under Pharaoh’s authority as food to be stored in the cities. ³⁶ Let that food be a reserve for the land for the seven years of famine which will come upon the land of Egypt, so that the land may not perish in the famine.”

³⁷ The plan pleased Pharaoh and all his courtiers. ³⁸ And Pharaoh said to his courtiers, “Could we find another like him, a man in whom is the spirit of God [of a god—EF]?” ³⁹ So Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Since God has made all this known to you, there is none so discerning and wise as you. ⁴⁰ You shall be in charge of my court, and by your command shall all my people be directed [by your orders my people shall submit—EF; at your mouth all my people shall conform—REF; all my people shall obey your word—CS; JPS adds others: “order themselves” or “pay homage”, meaning of Heb. yishshak uncertain], only with respect to the throne shall I be superior to you.”

⁴¹ Pharaoh further said to Joseph, “See, I put you in charge of all the land of Egypt.” ⁴² And removing his signet ring from his hand, Pharaoh put it on Joseph’s hand; and he had him dressed in robes of fine linen, and put a

[REF] 19: There is confusion in the wording in regard to both the ears of grain and the cows, going back and forth between the word “thin” and the word “scrawny.” This minor point is instructive because it is a good example of a well-known scribal phenomenon, the confusion of the letters dalet and resh, which looked similar in many periods. The two words in Hebrew are dakot (thin) and rakot (scrawny). The chance of error is increased because the word is sometimes followed by nun (bad), and this alliteration further draws a scribe’s eye to see a resh in place of a dalet.

[RA] 28: Whatever the considerations of source criticism, moreover, the name he uses for the deity in speaking with Pharaoh is elohim, the term that has general currency among polytheists and monotheists, and not the particularist Adonai.

[RA] 40: There is some doubt about the verb *yishak*. The usual sense of “will kiss” is extremely unlikely here, unless this is a peculiar idiom for civil obedience not otherwise attested. It is best to associate it with the noun *meshek* (15:2), which appears to refer to economic administration.

gold chain [collar—RA] about his neck. ⁴³ He had him ride in the chariot of his second-in-command, and they cried before him, “Abrek!” [royal stewards—CS; attention—EF; kneel—REF; JPS adds others: ‘Bow the knee,’ as though from Heb. barakh “to kneel,” or perhaps from an Egyptian word or Assyrian word of unknown meaning] Thus he placed him over all the land of Egypt.

⁴⁴ Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I am Pharaoh; yet without you, no one shall lift up hand or foot in all the land of Egypt.” ⁴⁵ Pharaoh then gave Joseph the name Tzafnat-paneach [Egyptian for “God speaks; he lives,” or “creator of life”], and he gave him for a wife As’nat bat Potiphera, priest of On. Thus Joseph emerged in charge of the land of Egypt. ⁴⁶ Joseph was 30 years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Leaving Pharaoh’s presence, Joseph traveled through all the land of Egypt [his influence went out over all the Land of Egypt—EF].

⁴⁷ During the seven years of plenty, the land produced in abundance [made gatherings—RA; produced in handful—EF; by fistfuls—REF; to overflowing—CS]. ⁴⁸ And he gathered all the grain of the seven years that the land of Egypt was enjoying [lit. the seven years that were in the land of Egypt], and stored the grain in the cities; he put in each city the grain of the fields around it. ⁴⁹ So Joseph collected produce in very large quantity, like the sands of the sea, until he ceased to measure it, for it could not be measured [it was uncountable—EF; it was without number—REF; beyond number—RA].

⁵⁰ Before the years of famine came, Joseph became the father of two sons, whom As’nat bat Poti-phaera, priest of On, bore to him. ⁵¹ Joseph named the first-born Menasheh [He who makes forget—EF], meaning, “God has made me forget completely my hardship [God has released me from all the debt of my hardship—RA] and my parental home.” ⁵² And the second he named Efrayim [Double-fruit—EF], meaning, “God has made me fertile in the land of my affliction.”

[NS] Lower Egypt, the northern area of the country, is virtually rainless. Its entire economy, of which agriculture was the core in ancient times, has always depended upon the Nile floods caused by the river’s periodic rise during three summer months. The swelling of the river results from the torrential rains in the Upper Nile Basin being carried down to the Delta by the Blue Nile. In ancient times, an elaborate series of artificially constructed irrigation works controlled the distribution and utilization of the flood waters. The measurements of the maximum levels of inundation were noted in the royal annals. Normally, the floods come with remarkable regularity. But there are years when the rainfall in the southern Sudan provides an insufficient volume of water. A shortfall of only a few inches could deny irrigation to the arid areas of the north, deprive the arable land of its productivity, and bring famine to the inhabitants of Egypt. The biblical story presupposes a succession of such low annual rises. This phenomenon of seven-year famines are well documented in Egyptian and other Near Eastern texts. The motif is present even in fertile Mesopotamia—in the Gilgamesh Epic, for example. Finally, it is found in Israel where the prophet Gad presents David with a choice of punishments, among them seven years of famine. There could not be, however, any natural connection between the famine in Egypt and that in neighboring countries since the two had entirely unrelated causes. The situation in Canaan resulted from a prolonged lack of rainfall that had nothing to do with the failure of the Nile to rise.

[JSB] 42: This is Joseph’s fifth and final change of clothes.

[RA] 42: the golden collar. Although English translators have repeatedly rendered this as “chain,” Egyptian bas-reliefs show a more elaborate ceremonial ornament made out of twisted gold wire that covered part of the shoulders and upper chest as well as the neck. In fact, the Hebrew word is not the normal term for “chain,” and reflects a root that means “to plait,” “to cushion,” “to pad.”

[JSB] 42: Rabbinic tradition identifies Poti-phaera, with Potiphar, but this is unlikely.

[NS] 46: Joseph loses no time in familiarizing himself with local conditions preparatory to his main task of enabling the Egyptians to survive the expected famine.

[RA] 51: Menasheh ... released me from all the debt. The naming pun is on the verbal stem נ-ש-ח. The virtually universal construal of this term here is “made me forget,” but it must be said that the root in that sense occurs only five times in the biblical corpus, and at least two or three of those are doubtful. It is also somewhat odd that Joseph should celebrate God for having made him forget his father’s house. But a very common usage of נ-ש-ח is “to hold in debt,” and a natural meaning of that stem in the pi-el conjugation, as here, would be “to relieve from the condition of debt.” Such an unambiguously positive verb is a better parallel to “made me fruitful” in the next verse.

⁵³ The seven years of abundance that the land of Egypt enjoyed came to an end, ⁵⁴ and the seven years of famine set in, just as Joseph had foretold. There was famine in all lands, but throughout the land of Egypt there was bread. ⁵⁵ And when all the land of Egypt felt the hunger, the people cried out to Pharaoh for bread; and Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, “Go to Joseph; whatever he tells you, you shall do.”

⁵⁶ Accordingly, when the famine became severe in the land of Egypt, Joseph laid open all that was within, and rationed out grain to the Egyptians. The famine, however, spread over the whole world. ⁵⁷ So all the world came to Joseph in Egypt to procure rations, for the famine had become severe throughout the world [*had grown harsh in all the earth—RA*].

Chapter 42

¹ When Jacob saw that there were food rations to be had in Egypt, he said to his sons, “Why do you keep looking at one another [*why are you fearful—RA*]? ² Now I hear,” Jacob went on, “that there are rations to be had in Egypt. Go down and procure rations for us there, that we may live and not die.” ³ So ten of Joseph’s brothers went down to get grain rations in Egypt; ⁴ for Jacob did not send Joseph’s brother Benjamin with his brothers, since he feared that he might meet with disaster. ⁵ Thus the sons of Israel were among those who came to procure rations, for the famine extended to the land of Canaan.

⁶ Now Joseph was the vizier [*the governor—EF; held sway over—CS; the regent of the land, he was the provider to all the people—RA; the one in charge—REF*] of the land; it was he who dispensed rations to all the people of the land. And Joseph’s brothers came and bowed low to him, with their faces [*brow—EF*] to the ground. ⁷ When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them; but he acted like a stranger toward [*pretended-no-recognition of—EF*] them and spoke harshly to them. He asked them, “Where do you come from?” And they said, “From the land of Canaan, to procure food.” ⁸ For though Joseph recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him. ⁹ Recalling the dreams that he had dreamed about them, Joseph said to them, “You are spies, you have come to see the land in its nakedness.” ¹⁰ But they said to him, “No, my lord! Truly, your servants have come to procure food. ¹¹ We are all of us sons of the same man; we are honest men; your servants have never been spies!” ¹² And he said to them, “No, you have come to see the land in its nakedness!” ¹³ And they replied, “We your servants were 12 brothers, sons of a certain man in the land of Canaan; the youngest, however, is now with our father, and one is no more.” ¹⁴ But Joseph said to them, “It is just as I have told you: You are spies! ¹⁵ By this you shall be put to the test: unless your youngest brother comes here, by Pharaoh [*as Pharaoh lives—EF; see comment on next page*], you shall not depart from this place! ¹⁶ Let one of you go and bring your brother, while the rest of you remain confined, that your words may be put to the test whether there is truth in you. Else, by Pharaoh, you are nothing but spies!” ¹⁷ And he confined them in the guardhouse for three days.

[REF] 42:1. Jacob saw. The text says that “Jacob saw” that grain was available in Egypt. How could he have seen it? This rather reflects the metaphor of seeing as meaning to know, to learn, to find out, to comprehend. It shows the high value we place on sight over the other senses. The Torah conveys this in many ways, including a progression: Isaac cannot see on his deathbed, and so he is deceived. Jacob cannot see on his deathbed, but he has more insight than he did when he was young and could see. (He sees his grandsons’ destinies, when earlier he could not see what was going on among his sons.) And then Moses’ “eye was not dim” up to the time of his death at the age of 120.

[RA] 3-4: When the 10 go down to Egypt to encounter the vizier, they are identified as Joseph’s brothers, not Jacob’s sons, with the pointed note that only Benjamin is Joseph’s full brother.

[REF] 42:5. sons of Israel. Until now they have been called “sons of Jacob.” Now they are called “sons of Israel” for the first time just as they come to Egypt. One explanation is that it is in Egypt that they will grow and become the nation that will be known as Israel. (The nation is called “children of Israel” 350 times in the Torah but never “children of Jacob.)

[CS] 9: Nakedness. Joseph refers to Egypt’s military exposure from the Sinai peninsula, where the country was most vulnerable. Garrisons transmitted daily reports detailing the entry and exit of all strangers.

[RA] 11: We are all the sons of one man. We are honest. Your servants would never be spies. This series of three brief sentences, without connecting “and’s,” is uncharacteristic of biblical style, and be intended to reflect the brothers’ emphatic, anxious defensiveness in the face of Joseph’s wholly unexpected accusation.

¹⁸ On the third day Joseph said to them, “Do this and you shall live, for I am a God-fearing man. ¹⁹ If you are honest men, let one of you brothers be held in your place of detention, while the rest of you go and take home rations for your starving **[for the famine-supply of—EF]** households; ²⁰ but you must bring me your youngest brother, that your words may be verified and that you may not die.” And they did accordingly. ²¹ They said to one another, “Alas, we are being punished on account of our brother, because we looked on at his anguish **[we saw his heart’s distress—EF; we saw his soul’s distress—CS, REF]**, yet paid no heed as he pleaded with us. That is why this distress has come upon us.” ²² Then Reuben spoke up and said to them, “Did I not tell you, ‘Do no wrong to the boy’? But you paid no heed. Now comes the reckoning for his blood.” ²³ They did not know that Joseph understood, for there was an interpreter between him and them. ²⁴ He turned away from them and wept. But he came back to them and spoke to them; and he took Simeon from among them and had him bound before their eyes. ²⁵ Then Joseph gave orders to fill their bags with grain, return each one’s money to his sack, and give them provisions for the journey; and this was done for them. ²⁶ So they loaded their asses with the rations and departed from there.

²⁷ As one of them was opening his sack to give feed to his ass at the night encampment, he saw his money right there at the mouth of his bag. ²⁸ And he said to his brothers, “My money has been returned! It is here in my bag!” Their hearts sank; and, trembling, they turned to one another, saying, “What is this that God has done to us?”

²⁹ When they came to their father Jacob in the land of Canaan, they told him all that had befallen them, saying, ³⁰ “The man who is lord of the land spoke harshly to us and accused us of spying on the land.

³¹ We said to him, ‘We are honest men; we have never been spies! ³² There were 12 of us brothers, sons by the same father; but one is no more, and the youngest is now with our father in the land of Canaan: ³³ But the man who is lord of the land said to us, ‘By this I shall know that you are honest men: leave one of your brothers with me, and take something for your starving households and be off. ³⁴ And bring your youngest brother to me, that I may know that you are not spies but honest men. I will then restore your brother to you, and you shall be free to move about in the land.’”

³⁵ As they were emptying their sacks, there, in each one’s sack, was his money-bag! When they and their father saw their money-bags, they were dismayed. ³⁶ Their father Jacob said to them, “It is always me that you bereave **[it is I who bear it all—RA; you have left me bereft—CS]**: Joseph is no more and Simeon is no more, and now you would take away Benjamin. These things always happen to me!”

³⁷ Then Reuben said to his father, “You may kill my two sons if I do not bring him back to you. Put him in my care, and I will return him to you.” ³⁸ But he said, “My son must not go down with you, for his brother is dead and he alone is left. If he meets with disaster on the journey you are taking, you will send my white head down to Sheol in grief.”

[RA] 15-16: Joseph’s swearing by Pharaoh at first seems merely part of his playing his role as Egyptian. Not until verse 23 do we learn that he is addressing them through an interpreter, so the locution also probably reflects the fact that he is speaking Egyptian.

[JSB] 24: As Leah’s second son (29.31-33), Simeon is the appropriate hostage for Benjamin, Rachel’s second son (35.18). His name echoes the Hebrew of “paid no heed” in 42.21, 22.

[CS] 35: Having discovered the money during their long journey, they now play a game of surprise for their father (and, evidently, they also frighten themselves!). Jacob, the erstwhile deceiver, is once again on the receiving end of deceit.

Chapter 43

¹ But the famine in the land was severe. ² And when they had eaten up the rations which they had brought from Egypt, their father said to them, “Go again and procure some food for us.” ³ But Judah said to him, “The man warned us, ‘Do not let me see your faces’ unless your brother is with you: ⁴ If you will let our brother go with us, we will go down and procure food for you; ⁵ but if you will not let him go, we will not go down, for the man said to us, ‘Do not let me see your faces’ unless your brother is with you.” ⁶

And Israel said, “Why did you serve me so ill [*why have you done me wrong—REF, CS*] as to tell the man that you had another brother?” ⁷ They replied, “But the man kept asking about us and our family, saying, ‘Is your father still living? Have you another brother?’ And we answered him accordingly. How were we to know that he would say, ‘Bring your brother here’?”

⁸ Then Judah said to his father Israel, “Send the boy in my care, and let us be on our way, that we may live and not die, you and we and our children.

⁹ I myself will be surety for him; you may hold me responsible: if I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, I shall stand guilty before you forever. ¹⁰ For we could have been there and back twice if we had not dawdled.”

¹¹ Then their father Israel said to them, “If it must be so, do this: take some of the choice products of the land in your baggage, and carry them down as a gift for the man—some balm and some honey, gum, ladanum, pistachio nuts, and almonds. ¹² And take with you double the money, carrying back with you the money that was replaced in the mouths of your bags; perhaps it was a mistake. ¹³ Take your brother too; and go back at once to the man. ¹⁴ And may El Shaddai dispose the man to mercy toward you, that he may release to you, your other brother, as well as Benjamin. As for me, if I am to be bereaved, I shall be bereaved.”

¹⁵ So the men took that gift, and they took with them double the money, as well as Benjamin. They made their way down to Egypt, where they presented themselves to Joseph. ¹⁶ When Joseph saw Benjamin with them, he said to his house steward, “Take the men into the house; slaughter and prepare an animal, for the men will dine with me at noon.” ¹⁷ The man did as Joseph said, and he brought the men into Joseph’s house. ¹⁸ But the men were frightened at being brought into Joseph’s house. “It must be,” they thought, “because of the money replaced in our bags the first time that we have been brought inside, as a pretext to attack us and seize us as slaves, with our pack animals.” ¹⁹ So they went up to Joseph’s house steward and spoke to him at the entrance of the house. ²⁰ “If you please, my lord;” they said, “we came down once before to procure food. ²¹ But when we arrived at the night encampment and opened our bags, there was each one’s money in the mouth of his bag, our money in full.” So we have brought it back with us. ²² And we have brought down with us other money to procure food. We do not know who put the money in our bags.”

[JSB] 43.1-34: The brothers’ second trip to Egypt. Chapters 43-45 repeat the pattern of chapter 42, only with variations, greater detail, and much greater emotional tension. Once again, the brothers depart for Egypt, approach Joseph fearfully, find themselves subjected to a frightening test of their honesty as well as accusations of deceit, and once again they return to their father. Chapter 43 records, first, Judah’s persuasion of a reluctant Jacob to release his beloved Benjamin and, second, the ensuing encounter of Joseph and his brothers—this time all 11 of them.

[JSB] 9: The balm and ladanum (a fragrant resin) recall the commodities conveyed by the Ishmaelite caravan in 37.25.

²³ He replied, “All is well with you; do not be afraid. Your God, the God of your father, must have put treasure in your bags for you. I got your payment.” And he brought out Simeon to them.

²⁴ Then the man brought the men into Joseph’s house; he gave them water to bathe their feet, and he provided feed for their asses. ²⁵ They laid out their gifts to await Joseph’s arrival at noon, for they had heard that they were to dine there.

²⁶ When Joseph came home, they presented to him the gifts that they had brought with them into the house, bowing low before him to the ground. ²⁷ He greeted them, and he said, “How is your aged father of whom you spoke? Is he still in good health?” ²⁸ They replied, “It is well with your servant our father; he is still in good health.” And they bowed and made obeisance.

²⁹ Looking about, he saw his brother Benjamin, his mother’s son, and asked, “Is this your youngest brother of whom you spoke to me?” And he went on, “May God be gracious to you, my boy.” ³⁰ With that, Joseph hurried out, for he was overcome with feeling toward his brother **[his feeling for his brother was boiling—REF; he was deeply stirred with tender warmth toward his brother—CS; his feelings were so kindled towards his brother—EF]** and was on the verge of tears; he went into a room and wept there. ³¹ Then he washed his face, reappeared, and—now in control of himself—gave the order, “Serve the meal.” ³² They served him by himself, and them by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves; for the Egyptians could not dine with the Hebrews, since that would be abhorrent to **[was an abomination to—CS]** the Egyptians. ³³ As they were seated by his direction, from the oldest in the order of his seniority to the youngest in the order of his youth, the men looked at one another in astonishment.

³⁴ Portions were served them from his table; but Benjamin’s portion was **several [lit. five]** times that of anyone else. And they drank their fill with him.

Chapter 44

¹ Then he instructed his house steward as follows, “Fill the men’s bags with food, as much as they can carry, and put each one’s money in the mouth of his bag. ² Put my silver goblet in the mouth of the bag of the youngest one, together with his money for the rations,” and he did as Joseph told him.

³ With the first light of morning, the men were sent off with their pack animals. ⁴ They had just left the city and had not gone far, when Joseph said to his steward, “Up, go after the men! And when you overtake them, say to them, ‘Why did you repay good with evil?’ ⁵ It is the very one from which my master drinks and which he uses for divination. It was a wicked thing for you to do!”

⁶ He overtook them and spoke those words to them. ⁷ And they said to him, “Why does my lord say such things? Far be it from your servants to do anything of the kind!

[JSB] 32: It is unclear why Egyptians would find it abhorrent to dine with Hebrews. It may be connected to the report that Egyptians abhorred shepherds generally, a tradition lacking historical corroboration.

[RA] 32: The dietary exclusionism of the Egyptians is also attested by Herodotus. Both medieval and modern commentators have linked this taboo with an Egyptian prohibition against eating lamb, a staple of Hebrew diet.

[JSB] 33-34: Joseph no sooner reaffirms the principle of seniority—the brothers are amazed that the Egyptian vizier knows their order of birth—than he reenacts the favoritism for the youngest that once proved so problematic to the family. This time, however, the brothers show no resentment. This meal contrasts poignantly with the meal to which the brothers sat down after throwing Joseph into the pit.

[JSB] 44.1ff: The Incident of the silver goblet. This passage recalls Joseph’s clandestine return of his brothers’ money to their sacks, except this time Joseph specifically targets Jacob’s favored son (and Joseph’s stand-in), Benjamin (absent in the prior episode). This seems to be a test: Will the older 10 brothers jettison Benjamin when his presence becomes inconvenient, as they once did Joseph, or have they finally learned the painful lesson about family solidarity and filial obedience?

[REF] 44:1. each man’s silver. The first time, when 10 brothers come to Egypt, Joseph imprisons Simeon, and he has their silver placed back in their nine sacks. The second time, when they return with Benjamin, Joseph releases Simeon, and he has their silver placed back in their eleven sacks. The total number of portions of silver returned is 20, corresponding to the price that was paid for Joseph (37:28). It is yet another case of a hidden link between acts of deception and their payoff in later events.

⁸ Here we brought back to you from the land of Canaan the money that we found in the mouths of our bags. How then could we have stolen any silver or gold from your master's house! ⁹ Whichever of your servants it is found with shall die; the rest of us, moreover, shall become slaves to my lord." ¹⁰ He replied, "Although what you are proposing is right, only the one with whom it is found shall be my slave; but the rest of you shall go free,"

¹¹ So each one hastened to lower his bag to the ground, and each one opened his bag. ¹² He searched, beginning with the oldest and ending with the youngest; and the goblet turned up in Benjamin's bag. ¹³ At this they rent their clothes. Each reloaded his pack animal, and they returned to the city.

¹⁴ When Judah and his brothers reentered the house of Joseph, who was still there, they threw themselves on the ground before him. ¹⁵ Joseph said to them, "What is this deed that you have done? Do you not know that a man like me practices divination?" ¹⁶ Judah replied, "What can we say to my lord? How can we plead, how can we prove our innocence? God has uncovered the crime of your servants. Here we are, then, slaves of my lord, the rest of us as much as he in whose possession the goblet was found." ¹⁷ But he replied, "Far be it from me to act thus! Only he in whose possession the goblet was found shall be my slave; the rest of you go back in peace to your father."

[RA] 1: put each man's silver in the mouth of his bag. This detail is a small puzzle because nothing is made of the discovery of silver when the majordomo searches through the bags. This seeming discrepancy has led critics to write off the return of the silver as a later addition made to harmonize this episode with the one in chapter 42, but that is by no means a necessary conclusion. Joseph's scheme, after all, is to make the brothers feel they are trapped in a network of uncanny circumstances they can neither control nor explain. A repetition of the device of returning the silver would nicely serve this purpose. The majordomo, however, is exclusively focused on the retrieval of a particular silver object, the divining goblet, and so does not even deign to mention the weights of silver in the bags, as though their appearance there were a matter of course, whatever consternation it might cause the brothers. Meanwhile, as in dream logic—or perhaps one should say, guilt logic—the brothers, who once took silver when they sold Joseph down into Egypt, seem helpless to "return" the silver to Egypt, as much as they try. The returned silver, moreover, makes the purported stealing of the silver goblet look all the more heinous.

[NS] 2. goblet Hebrew *g'viah* is probably a loan word from an Egyptian word meaning "libation vessel." The fact that we are told it is made of silver is not meant solely to emphasize its preciousness; the offense would be grave enough no matter what the composition of the goblet might have been. The main point here is that Hebrew *kesef*, "silver, money," is a key word, reiterated 20 times in the accounts of Joseph and his brothers in Egypt.

[JSB] 5: In contrast to other passages in the Torah, divination (fortune-telling) is not here condemned. The practice suggests Joseph's ominous dreams, the immediate cause of his brothers' selling him into slavery, and the silver of the goblet recalls the "20 pieces of silver" they received for selling him.