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The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation
Commentary by NAHUM M. SARNA



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Designed by ADRIANNE ONDERDONK DUDDEN

37 ^{VA-YESHEV} Now Jacob was settled in the land where his father had sojourned, the land of Canaan. ²This, then, is the line of Jacob:

וישב יעקב בארץ מגורי אביו בארץ
 כנען: ²אלה תלדות יעקב יוסף בן־שבע־

CHAPTER 37

Prologue to the Joseph Story (vv. 1–36)

Va-Yeshev

The rest of the Book of Genesis is devoted to the story of Joseph—except for the abrupt and puzzling intrusion of the episode of Judah and Tamar (chap. 38) and Jacob’s moving last testament (chap. 49). The present section and the preceding chapter are linked by their depiction of the contrasting fortunes of Esau and Jacob. Esau has already attained peoplehood and has established kingship and tribal territory in the hill country of Seir, to which his clan had migrated (36:6–8,43; cf. Deut. 2:5). But Jacob must go down to Egypt where his offspring will become enslaved, as foretold in the covenant God made with Abraham: “Your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs” (15:13). This same picture of contrasting destinies appears as an explicit element in Joshua’s farewell speech to the tribal confederation delivered at Shechem: “I gave Esau the hill country of Seir as his possession, while Jacob and his children went down to Egypt” (Josh. 24:4). Both events belong to God’s scheme of history; from now on, however, it will be the fortunes of Israel alone that will engage the attention of the biblical Narrator.

The importance of the Joseph story lies in the fact that it initiates the chain of events that leads to the descent to Egypt; it is the prelude to the drama of oppression and redemption that constitutes the overriding motif of biblical theology. Joseph’s experience is the culmination of a series of episodes set in motion by causes that were often temporal, petty, sordid, and mundane. A father’s favoritism, tittle-tattle, sibling jealousies, egotistic boyish dreams—all these are elements of a family situation that culminates in explosive tragedy.

The story of Joseph and his brothers differs markedly from the preceding patriarchal narratives. By far the longest and most complete narrative in Genesis, it is set forth by a master storyteller who employs with consummate skill the novelistic techniques of character delineation, psychological manipulation, and dramatic suspense. Another unique feature is the outwardly “secular” mold in which the narrative is cast, the miraculous or supernatural element being conspicuously absent. There are no direct divine revelations or communications to Joseph. He builds no altars. He has no associations with cultic centers. God never openly and directly intervenes in his life. No wonder that Joseph is not included among the patriarchs (cf. Exod. 2:24) and that Jewish tradition restricts that category to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Ber. 16b). Nevertheless, the secularity of the story is superficial, for the narrative is infused with a profound sense that God’s guiding hand imparts meaning and direction to seemingly haphazard events: when Joseph is lost he meets “a man” who knows exactly where his brothers are (37:15); the caravans of traders happen to be going to Egypt (37:25,28); the Lord is with Joseph in Potiphar’s house (39:2) and in prison (39:21f.). It is significant that the name of God comes readily to Joseph’s lips at critical moments: when he is confronted by Potiphar’s wife (39:9); when he interprets dreams (40:8; 41:16 et seq.); and when he tests his brothers (42:18). The ultimate interpretation of events is given by Joseph himself at the dramatic conclusion of the narrative: “God has sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival on earth, and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance. So, it was not you who sent me here, but God” (45:7,8).

THE BEGINNING OF HOSTILITY (vv. 1–4)

1. *Now Jacob was settled in the land* In contrast to Esau, who had migrated.¹

where his father had sojourned That is, the land of Canaan, which only Isaac, of the three patriarchs, had never left. More specifically, the reference is to the Hebron region (v. 14), where Jacob had gone to visit his aged father and where his father had died (35:27). Actually, according to the Genesis chronologies, Isaac was still alive when the events in this chapter took place. This may be

At seventeen years of age, Joseph tended the flocks with his brothers, as a helper to the sons of his father's wives Bilhah and Zilpah. And Joseph brought bad reports of them to their father. ³Now Israel loved Joseph best of all his sons, for he was the child of his old age; and he had made him an ornamented tunic. ⁴And when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of his brothers, they

עָשָׂה שָׁנָה הָיָה רָעָה אֶת־אָחָיו בְּצֹאן וְהוּא נָעַר
 אֶת־בְּנֵי בְלֵהָה וְאֶת־בְּנֵי זִלְפָּה נְשֵׁי אָבִיו וַיָּבֵא
 יוֹסֵף אֶת־הַדְּבָרִים רָעָה אֶל־אֲבִיהֶם: 3 וַיִּשְׂרָאֵל
 אָהֵב אֶת־יוֹסֵף מִכָּל־בְּנָיו כִּי־בְנוֹ־זְקֵנִים הוּא לוֹ
 וַעֲשָׂה לוֹ כְּתֹנֶת פָּסִים: 4 וַיֵּרְאוּ אָחָיו כִּי־אִתּוֹ

calculated as follows:² to the 13 years Joseph spent in slavery must be added the 7 years of plenty and the 2 years of famine that elapsed before Jacob's migration. To these 22 years must then be added the 17 Jacob spent in Egypt before he died, at age 147. If one deducts the resultant 39 years from the 147, Jacob would have been 108 when Joseph was sold by his brothers. Since Isaac was 60 when Jacob was born, and died at 180, Jacob must have been 120 at the time of Isaac's death. Hence, Isaac lived on another 12 years after the sale of Joseph (see Comment to v. 35).

2. This, then, is the line of Jacob Contrary to usage, no genealogy follows this formula.³ Mention of Joseph and his brothers is here, in effect, an abbreviated genealogy, the full version of which was already listed in 35:22–26.

tended . . . with his brothers Hebrew *ro'eh 'et* may carry a subtle suggestion of what is to follow since it can also be translated, "he used to lord it over his brothers."⁴

as a helper Hebrew *na'ar* is also used in this sense in describing Joshua's relationship to Moses.⁵

sons of . . . That is, he fraternized, in particular, with Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher.

Bilhah and Zilpah The order of the wives is here reversed⁶ since Joseph would have been naturally closer to Bilhah, his late mother's maid. The concubines were until now referred to as "maidservants" when mentioned together with Rachel and Leah. The use of "wives" here, as Ramban suggests, may indicate a new status acquired after their mistresses had both died.

bad reports of them This is the first of the several causes of enmity between Joseph and his brothers. The nature of the "reports" is not given.

3. Israel loved Joseph best This is the second cause of enmity. Jacob's favoritism was perhaps understandable, for Joseph was the son of his beloved wife Rachel, born after so many years of heartbreak and frustration. It is quite clear from 30:25 that the patriarch looked upon Joseph's birth as signaling the beginning of a new period in his life. Jacob's undisguised partiality intensified the hostility caused by his son's behavior.

Israel Throughout the narrative the two names of the patriarch interchange indiscriminately.

the child of his old age He was the last of Jacob's sons to be born in Paddan-aram.⁷

an ornamented tunic The precise meaning of Hebrew *ketonet passim* remains unclear. In 2 Samuel 13:18–19 the garment is mentioned as the distinctive dress of virgin daughters of royalty. Josephus describes it as "a long-sleeved tunic reaching to the ankle."⁸ In Aramaic and rabbinic Hebrew *pas* means the palm of the hand and the sole of the foot. Radak took *passim* to mean "striped." The Septuagint and Vulgate rendered the Hebrew "a robe of many colors."

Ancient Near Eastern art may shed some light on the subject. An Egyptian tomb painting at Beni-hasan from about 1890 B.C.E. features a Semitic clan with the men and women wearing multicolored tunics draped over one shoulder and reaching below the knees. Another Egyptian tomb has a representation of Syrian ambassadors bringing tribute to Tutankhamen. They are dressed in elaborately designed long robes wrapped around the body and over the shoulders. A mural fresco in the palace of King Zimri-lim at Mari, in southeast Syria, shows figures dressed in garments made of many small rectangular panels of multicolored cloth. The discovery of a "*pas* garment" (*lbt psm*) in a list of various articles of clothing from the town of Ugarit, dated not later than the thirteenth century B.C.E., provides a parallel to the biblical phrase but little clarification.⁹

hated him so that they could not speak a friendly word to him.

⁵Once Joseph had a dream which he told to his brothers; and they hated him even more. ⁶He said to them, "Hear this dream which I have dreamed: ⁷There we were binding sheaves in the field, when suddenly my sheaf stood up and remained upright; then your sheaves gathered around and bowed low to my sheaf." ⁸His brothers answered, "Do you mean to reign over us? Do you mean to rule over us?" And they hated him even more for his talk about his dreams.

⁹He dreamed another dream and told it to his brothers,

אָהַב אֶבְיָהֶם מִכָּל־אָחָיו וַיִּשְׁנֶאֱוֹ אֹתוֹ וְלֹא יָכְלוּ
דַּבְּרוּ לְשָׁלוֹם: ⁵ וַיַּחְלֶם יוֹסֵף חֲלוֹם וַיַּגִּד לְאָחָיו
וַיֹּסְפוּ עוֹד שִׁנְאָה אֹתוֹ: ⁶ וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵיהֶם שְׁמְעוּ־
נָא הַחֲלוֹם הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר חֲלַמְתִּי: ⁷ וְהִנֵּה אֲנִיחֶנּוּ
מֵאֲלֵמִים אֲלֵמִים בְּתוֹךְ הַשָּׂדֶה וְהִנֵּה קָמָה
אֲלַמְתִּי וְגַם־נִצְבָה וְהִנֵּה תִסְבִּינָה אֲלַמְתֵיכֶם
וַתִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ לְאֲלַמְתִּי: ⁸ וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוֹ אָחָיו הַמֶּלֶךְ
תִּמְלֹךְ עָלֵינוּ אִם־מִשׁוֹל תִּמְשָׁל בָּנוּ וַיֹּסְפוּ עוֹד
שִׁנְאָה אֹתוֹ עַל־חֲלֻמֹתָיו וְעַל־דִּבְרָיו: ⁹ וַיַּחְלֶם עוֹד

It may well be that the tunic was a sign of high social standing. It plays a key role in the narrative both because of the jealousy it aroused and because it was the only means by which Jacob could have been convinced that Joseph had been killed (vv. 31ff.).

4. loved him The Hebrew places the object *'oto* in an emphatic position before the verb: "It was he whom his father loved. . . ."

speak . . . to him Hebrew *dabbero* is unique. Usually the suffix attached to this verb carries a possessive sense, meaning "his speech." The passage would then be translated, "They could not abide his friendly speech." In other words, they rebuffed every attempt by Joseph to be friendly.¹⁰

JOSEPH'S DREAMS (vv. 5–11)

The third and most menacing source of discord was Joseph's dreams. This situation is easily understood when we view it against the cultural background of the times. Everywhere the dream was recognized as a means of divine communication. In the dreams previously described in Genesis, the revelation is straightforward and the message is conveyed verbally. In the case of Joseph's dreams, however, the language of communication is symbolic. God does not figure explicitly in the content of the dream; yet it is taken for granted that He is the source of the message being conveyed. The predictive aspect of dreams was universally assumed in the ancient world, and this was reason enough for the brothers to take Joseph seriously. However, since the dream was also recognized to be inseparable from the personality of the dreamer, reflecting his own needs and wishes, Joseph bore, in the eyes of his brothers, a measure of responsibility for his highly egocentric vision of superiority and lordship. Joseph's aspirations raised such hostility in his brothers as to inspire a conspiracy to murder (vv. 19–20).

THE FIRST DREAM (vv. 5–8)

5. to his brothers Not to his father, who does not figure in the first dream.

7. binding sheaves The documents found at Mari mention that pastoralists, although they were all shepherds, were employed to bring in the harvest. The agricultural motif here hints at the circumstances that will occasion Joseph's rise to greatness (chap. 41).

stood up . . . bowed low A clear assertion of authority by Joseph and of acquiescence on the part of his brothers.

8. Joseph's dreams are self-explanatory in contrast to those of the Egyptians, who need an interpreter to extract meaning from their enigmatic imagery (40:5–13; 41:1–8). The same need is present in the case of Nebuchadnezzar's dreams in the Book of Daniel (chaps. 2, 4). There is no record of an Israelite ever requiring the skill of an interpreter of dreams.

And they hated him The threefold repetition of this phrase (vv. 4,5,8) suggests an ever-increasing intensity of hostile emotions.¹¹

saying, “Look, I have had another dream: And this time, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me.” ¹⁰And when he told it to his father and brothers, his father berated him. “What,” he said to him, “is this dream you have dreamed? Are we to come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow low to you to the ground?” ¹¹So his brothers were wrought up at him, and his father kept the matter in mind.

¹²One time, when his brothers had gone to pasture their father’s flock at Shechem, ¹³Israel said to Joseph, “Your

חֲלוֹם אַחֵר וַיִּסְפֹּר אֹתוֹ לְאָחָיו וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה
חֲלֹמְתֵי חֲלוֹם עוֹד וְהִנֵּה הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ וְהַיָּרֵחַ וְאַחַד
עֶשְׂרֵי כּוֹכָבִים מִשְׁתַּחֲוִים לִי: ¹⁰ וַיִּסְפֹּר אֶל־אָבִיו
וְאֶל־אָחָיו וַיִּגְעַר־בּוֹ אָבִיו וַיֹּאמֶר לֹ מָה הַחֲלוֹם
הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר חֲלַמְתָּ הֲבֹא נִבְּוֵא אֲנִי וְאַמְתָּ וְאַחֶיךָ
לְהִשְׁתַּחֲוֹת לְךָ אֶרְצָה: ¹¹ וַיִּקְנְאוּ־בּוֹ אָחָיו וְאָבִיו
שָׁמַר אֶת־הַדְּבָר: שְׁנֵי ¹² וַיִּלְכוּ אָחָיו לְרֻעוֹת
אֶת־צֹאן אֲבֵיהֶם בְּשֶׁכֶם: ¹³ וַיֹּאמֶר יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־

v. 12. נקוד על את

for his talk about his dreams That is, for his boastful narration of them. Since the phrase is, literally, “for his dreams and for his words,” the latter may refer to his reports of their bad conduct.

dreams The plural is odd at this point. It either anticipates the second dream or implies a previous, unreported history of similar vainglorious dreams.¹²

THE SECOND DREAM (vv. 9–11)

9. another dream Throughout the Joseph narratives, dreams come in pairs¹³ in order to demonstrate their seriousness, as noted in 41:32. The possibility of an idle dream was recognized by the ancients. From the literature of the ancient Near East we have accounts of double, triple, and even sevenfold repetition of dreams in which one symbol is successively substituted for another, although the basic meaning and central theme remain the same throughout the series.

the sun . . . This time the dream has a celestial setting and reproduces Joseph’s secret thoughts and aspirations in a more obvious manner. The dream now includes his parents among those who are to be subservient to him.

stars This symbolism for the brothers is perhaps suggested by the repeated image comparing Israel to the stars of the heaven.¹⁴

10. and brothers Joseph now recounts his dream a second time, in the presence of his father as well. The brothers’ silence on both occasions is ominous.

berated him Publicly, hoping thereby not only to relieve the tension, but also to curb Joseph’s sense of self-importance.¹⁵

your mother Since she was long dead (35:19), this is either a distortion, which is not an uncommon element in dreams, or a reference to Joseph’s stepmother, Bilhah.¹⁶ Some scholars believe that this verse, along with 44:20, betrays an earlier version of the narrative in which Rachel was still alive at this time. However, if this were so, ten stars, not eleven, would be expected, since Benjamin would not yet have been born.

to the ground Joseph has not uttered this phrase. In adding it, Jacob subconsciously echoes the manner in which he himself had made obeisance to his brother Esau (33:3). Its use here is an intimation of future developments, for it appears in the narrative each time the brothers bow to Joseph in Egypt.¹⁷

11. The repetition of the dream has established the authenticity and seriousness of the message. Jacob muses upon it. The brothers now look upon him with passionate hatred.

THE SALE OF JOSEPH (vv. 12–36)

12. his brothers In contrast to the report in verse 2, Joseph was not with them, probably because he was now exempt from labor (see Comment to v. 2).

brothers are pasturing at Shechem. Come, I will send you to them.” He answered, “I am ready.” ¹⁴And he said to him, “Go and see how your brothers are and how the flocks are faring, and bring me back word.” So he sent him from the valley of Hebron.

When he reached Shechem, ¹⁵a man came upon him wandering in the fields. The man asked him, “What are you looking for?” ¹⁶He answered, “I am looking for my brothers. Could you tell me where they are pasturing?” ¹⁷The man said, “They have gone from here, for I heard them say: Let us go to Dothan.” So Joseph followed his brothers and found them at Dothan.

¹⁸ They saw him from afar, and before he came close to them they conspired to kill him. ¹⁹They said to one

יוסף הלא אחיך רעים בשכם לכה ואשלחך אליהם ויאמר לו הנני: ¹⁴ ויאמר לו לך-נא ראה את-שלוש אחיך ואת-שלוש הצאן והשבני דבר וישלחהו מעמק חברון ויבא שכמה: ¹⁵ וימצאהו איש והנה תעה בשדה וישאלהו האיש לאמר מה-תבקש: ¹⁶ ויאמר את-אחי אנכי מבקש הגידה-נא לי איפה הם רעים: ¹⁷ ויאמר האיש נסעו מזה כי שמעתי אמרים נלכה דתנינה וילך יוסף אחר אחיו וימצאם בדתן: ¹⁸ ויראו אתו מרחק ובטרום יקרב אליהם ויתנבלו אתו להמיתו: ¹⁹ ויאמרו איש אל-אחיו

at Shechem See Comment to 12:6. Being pastoral nomads, the brothers periodically move to temporary centers in order to secure pasturage for their livestock. The area around Shechem is blessed with an adequate water supply and fertile soil, and the city itself holds rich associations for Jacob and his family. The patriarch encamped there after returning from his long exile abroad, bought a plot of land, and set up an altar to the “God of Israel” (33:18–20). Joseph’s remains were to be later interred in that very plot (Josh. 24:32).

13–14. In view of the relationship between Joseph and his brothers, Jacob’s action is surprising and Joseph’s ready response no less so. Clearly, the brothers had hitherto successfully disguised their true feelings and, indeed, there is no record of their having uttered any threats against Joseph. Shechem had been the site of a bloody massacre carried out by the brothers, who had apparently captured the city (chap. 34). This incident must have occurred very recently since Dinah was about the same age as Joseph (30:21–24) and could hardly have been younger than about fifteen at the time. Joseph is now seventeen (v. 2). The danger inherent in the brothers’ presence in the vicinity of Shechem (cf. 34:30) may have been the source of Jacob’s anxiety.¹⁸

14. how . . . are . . . word Hebrew *shalom* . . . *davar*, the same two words, but in reverse order, as used in the hostile context of verse 4. The verbal association suggests the underlying tragedy of the situation.

valley of Hebron A name found nowhere else. Hebron itself was located on a hill (see Comment to 13:18), but the Cave of Machpelah, in which Abraham was buried, was located in a field outside the city and the text may well refer to this area.¹⁹ One midrash sees in the extraordinary mention of this place a hint that the first stage in the fulfillment of the prophecy made to Abraham (15:13) is about to begin.

Hebron . . . Shechem A distance of some 50 miles (80 km.). The south-north watershed road that traversed the central hill country connected these two cities. It split into two at Shechem, one branch turning northwest to Dothan (v. 17).

15–17. The entire journey must have taken about five days by foot. Joseph here exhibits a dogged persistence, undoubtedly a quality that later earned him the confidence of his Egyptian masters during his captivity.

The exchange between Joseph and the man is reported only in briefest outline. To be of help, the stranger surely must have asked for the identity of the brothers.

17. Dothan An ancient fortress town about 13 miles (21 km.) northwest of Shechem, lying in a valley known for its rich pastureland.²⁰

18. The brothers are now far from their father’s restraining presence. The mere sight of Joseph ignites their hatred and murderous passions.

another, “Here comes that dreamer! ²⁰Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; and we can say, ‘A savage beast devoured him.’ We shall see what comes of his dreams!” ²¹But when Reuben heard it, he tried to save him from them. He said, “Let us not take his life.” ²²And Reuben went on, “Shed no blood! Cast him into that pit out in the wilderness, but do not touch him yourselves”—intending to save him from them and restore him to his father. ²³When Joseph came up to his brothers, they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the ornamented tunic that he was wearing, ²⁴and took him and cast him into the pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

הִנֵּה בָּעַל הַחֲלֻמוֹת הַלְוִיָּהּ בָּא: ²⁰ וְעַתָּה לְכוּ וְנִהְרָגְהוּ וְנִשְׁלַכְהוּ בְּאֶחָד הַבְּרוֹת וְאָמַרְנוּ חַיָּה רָעָה אֲכָלָתוֹ וְנִרְאָה מִהֲיֵינּוּ חֲלֻמָּתוֹ: ²¹ וַיִּשְׁמַע רְאוּבֵן וַיַּצִּלְהוּ מִיָּדָם וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא נִכְנֹנוּ נַפְשׁ: ²² וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם רְאוּבֵן אֲלֵתִּשְׁפֹּכוּ דָם הַשְּׁלִיכוּ אֹתוֹ אֶל־הַבּוֹר הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר בְּמִדְבָּר וְיָד אֲלֵתִּשְׁלַחוּ־בּוֹ לְמַעַן הַצִּיל אֶת־מִיָּדָם לְהַשְׁיבוֹ אֶל־אָבִיו: שְׁלִישִׁי ²³ וַיְהִי בְּאֲשֶׁר־בָּא יוֹסֵף אֶל־אֶחָיו וַיַּפְּשִׁטוּ אֶת־יוֹסֵף אֶת־כִּתְנֹתָו אֶת־כִּתְנֹת הַפָּסִים אֲשֶׁר עָלָיו: ²⁴ וַיִּקְחֻהוּ וַיִּשְׁלְכוּ אֹתוֹ

20. kill him Hebrew *b-r-g*, which connotes ruthless violence, is the same verb that is used when Cain slays Abel.

one of the pits These would be cisterns hewn out of rock intended for gathering and storing water in the rainy season. Large numbers of such cisterns have been found in excavations all over the Land of Israel. They vary in depth from six to as much as twenty-four feet. Dried out cisterns were occasionally used as temporary places of detention.²¹ Murderers seem to have deliberately slaughtered their victims near such pits in order to dispose of the corpses there. One has only to bear in mind that lack of proper burial was considered to be the supreme dishonor in order to imagine something of the frenzied intensity of the brothers' hatred for Joseph. His wearing of the special tunic at the time probably was an added provocation.

21. The approach of Joseph galvanizes Reuben into action. On an earlier occasion he had impetuously asserted his rights as the first-born by taking his father's concubine (35:22); now he desperately asserts the authority that belongs to that status. His being under a cloud sharpened his sensitivity to the fact that he would surely bear the main share of blame for any misfortune. Perhaps he also hoped to regain his father's favor. There is no need, however, to question Reuben's sincerity. Still troubled by his failure to save Joseph (42:22), he is willing to go to extreme lengths in order to convince his father to let him be the protector of Benjamin (42:37).

he tried to save him Hebrew *va-yatsilehu*, which normally means “he saved him,” has the sense of “he came to the rescue.”

“Let us not” Rather, “We shall not!” The statement is made with a decisiveness that tolerates no opposition. The use of the first person plural makes clear that this is to be their collective decision.²² Indeed, the brothers do not say another word, either of assent or dissent (contrast v. 27).

22. After leaving suitable pause for his words to take effect, Reuben presses his psychological advantage.

“Shed no blood!” Now he uses the second person plural to emphasize his own loathing for the idea.

out in the wilderness Hebrew *midbar* here refers to the extensive, uninhabited pastureland in the region of Dothan. The brothers believe that Joseph will die of hunger and exposure, while Reuben thinks he can rescue him somehow without their noticing.

23. the ornamented tunic The explanatory comment is necessary in light of verse 33.

24. cast him into the pit The narrative is abbreviated here, as in verse 28, for it says nothing of Joseph's reactions to their deeds. It is clear from 42:21 that the boy was no silent participant in his own misfortune but pleaded to be released.

no water in it Since such pits were dug largely for water storage, the observation is necessary.²³

²⁵Then they sat down to a meal. Looking up, they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, their camels bearing gum, balm, and ladanum to be taken to Egypt. ²⁶Then Judah said to his brothers, “What do we gain by killing our brother and covering up his blood? ²⁷Come, let

הַבָּרָה וְהַבּוֹר רָק אֵין בּוֹ מַיִם: ²⁵ וַיֵּשְׁבוּ לֵאכֹל-
 לֶחֶם וַיִּשְׂאוּ עֵינֵיהֶם וַיִּרְאוּ וְהִנֵּה אַרְחַת
 יִשְׁמַעֵאלִים בָּאָה מִגִּלְעָד וּגְמָלֵיהֶם נֹשְׂאִים נֹכָחַת
 וְצִרְי וְלֹט הַזֹּלָקִים לְהוֹרִיד מִצְרַיִם: ²⁶ וַיֹּאמֶר
 יְהוּדָה אֶל-אֶחָיו מִה-בִּצְעַע בִּי נִהְרַג אֶת-אֶחָיו

25. sat down to a meal In callous indifference to their brother’s anguished pleas. The action allows time for further discussion of Joseph’s fate in the absence of Reuben. At the same time, it provides an interlude until a fresh and final opportunity for vengeance develops.

There is something portentous about this meal, as there is about the merchandise of the caravanners, for later in the narrative both reappear, and in the same language, as symbols of the reversal of fortunes between Joseph and his brothers.²⁴

a caravan of Ishmaelites The wandering traders are again so described in verse 27, and it is apparently they who buy Joseph, take him down to Egypt (v. 28), and sell him to Potiphar (39:1). However, Midianite traders are mentioned in verse 28, and these (or “Medanites”) are also said to be responsible for selling Joseph to Potiphar (v. 36).

The discrepancy in names has been variously explained by traditional commentators. Genesis Rabba 84:20, followed by Rashi, postulates that Joseph was traded several times. Ibn Ezra identifies the Ishmaelites with Midianites on the basis of Judges 8:24, which relates that Midianites possessed golden earrings “because they were Ishmaelites.” This passage suggests that the term “Ishmaelite” was used as an epithet for “nomadic traders” rather than in an ethnic sense. “Midianite,” on the other hand, indicates a specific ethnic affiliation. Even if the two names are indicative of originally distinct narrative strands that have here been interwoven, it must have been the close connection between Ishmael and Midian in biblical tradition—both being offspring of Abraham (25:1–2,12)—that led to their fusion.

The fact that all those who had a hand in the sale of Joseph into foreign slavery were his own kinsfolk serves to heighten the tragedy.

from Gilead The central mountainous region east of the River Jordan (see Comment to 31:21). Spices and perfumes probably formed an important source of income for its inhabitants.²⁵ The caravaneers would have traveled from Gilead by way of the Valley of Beth-Shean (Beisan). The road southward passed by Dothan and then turned westward to link up with the route to Egypt.

camels See Comment to 12:16.

gum . . . Gums and resins played an important role in the economy of Egypt as they constituted the ingredients of perfumes, cosmetics, and medicines, all of which were put to a wide variety of uses in the cult of the gods, in embalming the dead, as sanitizing and deodorizing agents, as insect repellents, and, above all, for cleansing and conditioning the body in the absence of soap. The identification of the products mentioned in this verse is not at all certain, and there is no unanimity of translation among the ancient versions and traditions. The term translated here “gum” (Heb. *nekh’ot*) is generally taken to be “gum tragacanth,” a sticky substance that exudes from the bark of shrubs of the genus *Astragalus*, which is native to arid high mountainous regions in the Near East. “Balm” (Heb. *tse/ori*) may be either a fragrant plant or a resin (Ker. 6a) derived from *Commiphora opobalsamum*. Its medicinal properties were widely recognized, as shown by Jeremiah 8:22 and 51:8. “*La(b)danum*” for Hebrew *lot* is similarly uncertain. If correct, it would refer to the oleoresin that exudes from the cistus shrub.

The uncommonly detailed account of the fragrant wares, which the brothers could not possibly have spotted from the distance, is explained in Genesis Rabba 84:16 as indicating a providential amelioration of Joseph’s suffering on the road to Egypt in that, at least, he was not subject to the usual malodors that characterized nomadic caravans.

26. Judah He now assumes leadership, a role he is later to take once again in the protection of Benjamin.²⁶ The text leaves unclear whether Judah’s suggestion is a desperate compromise to save Joseph’s life, or whether his “What do we gain?” is an expression of sordid hostility.

us sell him to the Ishmaelites, but let us not do away with him ourselves. After all, he is our brother, our own flesh.” His brothers agreed. ²⁸When Midianite traders passed by, they pulled Joseph up out of the pit. They sold Joseph for twenty pieces of silver to the Ishmaelites, who brought Joseph to Egypt.

²⁹When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he rent his clothes. ³⁰Returning to his

וּכְסִינוּ אֶת־דָּמוֹ: ²⁷ לָכֵן וְנִמְכַרְנוּ לִישְׁמַעֲאֵלִים וְיָדְנֹנוּ אֶל־תְּהֵי־בֹ כִּי־אֶחָיו בְּשָׂרְנוּ הוּא וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ אֶחָיו: ²⁸ וַיַּעֲבְרוּ אַנְשֵׁים מִדְּיָנִים סְחָרִים וַיִּמְשְׁכוּ וַיַּעֲלוּ אֶת־יוֹסֵף מִן־הַבּוֹר וַיִּמְכְּרוּ אֶת־יוֹסֵף לִישְׁמַעֲאֵלִים בְּעֶשְׂרִים כֶּסֶף וַיָּבִיאוּ אֶת־יוֹסֵף מִצְרַיִם: ²⁹ וַיֵּשֶׁב רְאוּבֵן אֶל־הַבּוֹר וַהֲנֵה אֵיזֶר יוֹסֵף בַּבּוֹר וַיִּקְרַע אֶת־בְּגָדָיו: ³⁰ וַיָּשֶׁב אֶל־אֶחָיו

At any rate, this narrative reflects the history of the Israelite tribes. Reuben’s authority is on the decline while Judah rises to prominence. In consonance with this is Jacob’s acceptance of a proposal by Judah (43:11–14) after having previously rejected the same advice from Reuben (42:37f.).

killing By leaving him to die in the pit. It is also possible that in Reuben’s absence (v. 29) the idea of murdering Joseph had been revived.

covering up his blood In the biblical idiom, the blood of a murder victim was said to “cry out” for justice (see Comment to 4:10). Uncovered blood thus served as a constant reminder of a crime and as an incitement to revenge.²⁷

27. flesh Used figuratively for kinship relationship.²⁸

agreed Literally, “heard.” The Hebrew verb here is neutral. It may connote listening in stony silence as well as willing assent.²⁹

28. Midianite See Comment to verse 25.

they pulled . . . sold The subject of the two Hebrew verbs is ambiguous. On the basis of 45:5, it is generally taken to be the brothers. However, if the Midianites and Ishmaelites are not identical, then it might be assumed that, to avoid hearing Joseph’s cries, the brothers had removed themselves some distance from the pit while they ate their meal. In the meantime, the Midianites chanced by and kidnapped Joseph. In 40:15 Joseph describes himself as having been kidnapped.

twenty pieces of silver The price of a slave would, of course, fluctuate with the market. The sum mentioned here corresponds to the monetary value of a male aged between five and twenty, as stated in Leviticus 27:5, presuming that the standard shekel is referred to in both instances. Twenty shekels is the average price of a slave in the laws of Hammurabi.³⁰

to Egypt In order to sell him in the slave market. Although war with foreign countries provided the main source of slaves in Egypt, commercial slave-trafficking was well established with both Syria and Canaan. This particular type of trade in human misery is well illustrated in Egyptian documents. One such document is the last will and testament of King Amen-em-het III (end of the 19th cent. B.C.E.), in which he provides for the disposal of four Asian slaves he had received as a gift from his brother. More interesting is a papyrus (BAP 35.1446) from ca. 1740 B.C.E., which contains an inventory of servants on an estate. Thirty-seven of the ninety-five slaves listed are Asian. The document derives from an age when there was no known military activity in Canaan and Syria and when there was active commerce between these two countries. There is thus evidence for a brisk trade with Egypt in Asian slaves. The sale of Joseph into Egyptian slavery accords well with what is known about the importation of slaves into that country from Canaan.

29. he rent his clothes Clearly, Reuben knows nothing about the sale and believes Joseph to be dead (cf. 42:22). This token of grief, called *keri’ah* in Hebrew, may have replaced an earlier custom of gashing the flesh.³¹ *Keri’ah* has remained a traditional sign of mourning among Jews to the present time. Before the funeral, a rent of at least four inches in length is made in the lapel of the mourner’s jacket, on the left lapel for parents and on the right for the other five relatives for whom formal mourning rites are obligatory (cf. Lev. 21:1–3). The mourner stands while the *keri’ah* is performed (cf. Job 1:20) and then recites a blessing acknowledging divine justice. Until modern times it was customary for the mourner himself to make the rent in his garment (YD, par. 340:1).

brothers, he said, “The boy is gone! Now, what am I to do?”³¹ Then they took Joseph’s tunic, slaughtered a kid, and dipped the tunic in the blood.³² They had the ornamented tunic taken to their father, and they said, “We found this. Please examine it; is it your son’s tunic or not?”³³ He recognized it, and said, “My son’s tunic! A savage beast devoured him! Joseph was torn by a beast!”³⁴ Jacob rent his clothes, put sackcloth on his loins, and observed mourning for his son many days.³⁵ All his sons and daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, saying, “No, I will go down mourning to my son in Sheol.” Thus his father bewailed him.

וַיֹּאמֶר הַיִּלָּד אֵינְנוּ וְאֲנִי אֲנִי אָנֹכִי: 31 וַיִּקְחוּ אֶת־כִּתְנֵת יוֹסֵף וַיִּשְׁחָטוּ שְׂעִיר עִזִּים וַיִּטְבְּלוּ אֶת־הַכִּתְנֵת בַּדָּם: 32 וַיִּשְׁלְחוּ אֶת־כִּתְנֵת הַפָּסִים וַיָּבִיאוּ אֶל־אָבִיהֶם וַיֹּאמְרוּ זֹאת מִצְאָנוּ הַכְּרִי־נָא הַכִּתְנֵת בְּנֵךְ הוּא אִם־לֹא: 33 וַיִּבְרָה וַיֹּאמֶר כִּתְנֵת בְּנֵי חַיָּה רָעָה אֲכָלְתָּהּ טָרֵף טָרֵף יוֹסֵף: 34 וַיִּקְרַע עֵקֶב יַעֲקֹב שְׂמֹלְתָיו וַיַּשֶּׂם שָׂק בְּמַתְנָיו וַיִּתְאַבֵּל עַל־בְּנוֹ יָמִים רַבִּים: 35 וַיִּקְמוּ כָל־בְּנָיו וְכָל־בָּנֹתָיו לְנַחֲמוֹ וַיִּמָּאֵן לְהִתְנַחֵם וַיֹּאמֶר כִּי־ אֲרָךְ אֶל־בְּנֵי אָבִל שְׂאֵלָה וַיִּבְךְ אֶתֹּו אָבִיו:

30. to his brothers Who had removed themselves from the scene after the sale (see Comment to v. 28).

is gone! Or, “is no more!”³²—perhaps meaning that Joseph must be dead.

what am I to do? An agonized cry. Literally, “as for me, whither do I go?”—to escape my father’s grief.³³

31. The brothers now use the alibi they had originally planned (v. 20).

tunic Compare verse 23.

a kid There is a touch of subtle irony here since years before, a kid and the garment of his brother had played key roles in Jacob’s deception of his father, as told in 27:9,15,16. Now his own sons deceive him through the instrumentality of a kid and their brother’s garment.

32. ornamented Its distinctive feature is mentioned because that is what establishes for Jacob the identity of its owner.

had . . . taken Literally, “They sent . . . and they brought,” preserving a separate subject for each verb. Hoping to avoid any suspicion of involvement in Joseph’s fate, the brothers apparently sent the bloodstained tunic to their father by way of others who pretended they had found it.³⁴ This interpretation overcomes the difficulty of the brothers’ harsh and unlikely statement about “your son’s tunic” when speaking to their father about their brother.

33. The full horror of the situation penetrates Jacob’s consciousness only in stages. First he recognizes the tunic; then its bloody and tattered state leads to the inference that a wild beast had devoured his son; then he has a vivid mental image of his beloved Joseph actually being torn to pieces.³⁵ Jacob has been trapped into uttering the very words the brothers had originally planned to say (v. 20).

34. rent his clothes See Comment to verse 29.

sackcloth Another symbol of grief,³⁶ a coarse material probably made of goat hair or camel hair.

many days His inconsolable grief was perhaps intensified by feelings of guilt at having sent Joseph alone on such a long and perilous journey.³⁷

35. daughters That is, Dinah and his daughters-in-law.³⁸

go down mourning That is, never cease to mourn until the day of his death.

Sheol The most frequently used term in biblical Hebrew for the abode of the spirits of the dead. The region was imagined to be situated deep beneath the earth and to be enclosed with gates. There is no concept of “heaven” and “hell” in the Hebrew Bible. The underworld received all men—good and bad, great and small—and all are equal there. It was a place of unrelieved darkness and

³⁶The Midianites, meanwhile, sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, a courtier of Pharaoh and his chief steward.

36 וְהַמְדָּנִים מְכָרוּ אֹתוֹ אֶל־מִצְרַיִם לְפֹתִיפָר סָרִיס פְּרָעָה שֶׁר הַטְּבָחִים: פ רביעי

gloom and of complete silence. None who entered it could return.³⁹ The etymology of the word “Sheol” is uncertain, and the term is unknown in other ancient Semitic languages.

his father bewailed him The slight ambiguity of the pronouns gave rise to the notion that Isaac wept over his grief-stricken son Jacob.⁴⁰ Isaac, in fact, was still alive at this time, according to the biblical chronologies (see Comment to v. 1).

36. The real fate of Joseph (v. 28), the main theme of the narrative, is repeated after the digression (cf. 39:1).

the Midianites See Comments to verses 25, 28. In 39:1, the ones who sell Joseph are termed “Ishmaelites.”

Potiphar The name of Joseph’s master is almost identical with that of his future father-in-law, Potiphara (41:45). This latter name has been explained as the Egyptian *Pa-di-pa-re*, meaning “he whom Re (the sun-god) has given.” It may be conjectured that Potiphar, a form not otherwise known, has been deliberately abbreviated in our narrative in order to avoid confusion of the two persons.

courtier Hebrew *saris*, from Akkadian *ša-rēši*, “the one at the head,” that is, an officer of the realm. Because of the practice of castrating court officials, the term acquired the sense of “eunuch.” However, this meaning cannot be applied indiscriminately, for Akkadian texts show that not all who held the title were emasculated, especially if they did not need to come into contact with the harem. Moreover, there does not seem to be evidence of eunuchs as an institution in ancient Egypt. Potiphar’s wife plays a crucial role in Joseph’s fortunes (chap. 39).

chief steward Hebrew *tabbah* yields the possibility of either “cook” or “slaughterer,” that is, executioner.⁴¹ The title “chief cook” would correspond to the Egyptian *wḏpw*, which originally also meant “cook,” but which came to be a general designation for persons attached to the services of nobles, princes, and kings.

CHAPTER 38

Judah and Tamar (vv. 1–30)

The story of Joseph’s fortunes is abruptly interrupted by a narrative about Judah that seems to be entirely unconnected to what precedes and follows it. Judah separates himself from his brothers, marries, and has three sons. In time, he finds a wife for his first-born son. She dies childless soon after his marriage. The second son refuses to follow what was then the common procedure and marry his dead brother’s wife. Then he, too, dies. When the widowed Tamar realizes that her claim for a husband is unlikely to be satisfied even through the third son of Judah, she deceives her father-in-law. Oblivious of her identity, Judah is intimate with her. Tamar gives birth to twins.

This digression heightens the reader’s suspense at a critical moment in the Joseph narrative, but the skillful blending of the chapter into the larger story shows that the digression is deliberate and the result of careful literary design, as noted in Genesis Rabba 85:3.

The concluding statement of chapter 37, about the sale of Joseph to Potiphar, is repeated in the first verse of chapter 39, thus providing continuity after the intervening diversion. The recurring use of certain key words also forges verbal links between chapter 38 and its preceding and following chapters. Thus the Hebrew root *y-r-d* appears in 37:35 (*’ered*, “I will go down”), 38:1 (*va-yered*, lit. “he went down”), and 39:1 (*hurad*, “was taken down”); the root *n-kh-r* is found in 37:32 (*hakkēr*, lit. “recognize”), verse 33 (*va-yakkirah*, “he recognized it”), as well as in 38:25 (*hakkēr*) and verse 26 (*va-yakker*); the root *n-h-m* is used twice in 37:35 (*le-naḥamo*, “to comfort him”; *le-hitnaḥem*, “to be comforted”) and in 38:12 (*va-yinnaḥem*, “was comforted”); while the root *’-r-ṣ* is employed in 38:17,

38 About that time Judah left his brothers and camped near a certain Adullamite whose name was Hirah. ²There

ל"ח ויהי בעת ההוא ויכרד יהודה מאת אחיו
ויט עד-איש ערלמי ושמו חירה: ² ויבא-שם

18, and 20 (*‘eravon*, “a pledge”) and in 43:9 (*‘e’ervennu*, lit. “I will pledge myself for him”) and 44:32 (*‘arav* “has pledged himself”). A kid from the flock plays a role in the Joseph story (37:31) as well as in this one (vv. 17,20). Deception occurs in both narratives; a point is proved through the production of tangible evidence (37:32–33; 38:25–26); the theme of female temptation is central to this and the following chapter; and the genealogy of Judah is repeated in 46:12 in a way that requires knowledge of 38:3–10, 29–30 in order for it to be understood.

All this shows that the story of Judah and Tamar serves a function that is more complex than a simple suspenseful pause. It cannot be an accident that all the places mentioned—Adullam, Chezib, Timnah, and Enam—are contained within the later territory of the tribe of Judah. Nor can it be coincidental that Adullam is connected with incidents in the life of David, that Bath-shua and Tamar are names similarly linked with the biography of that king, and that the episode here recounted closes with the birth of Judah’s sons, of whom Perez attained preeminence among the Judahite clans and became the ancestor of King David. This chapter, then, is replete with certain historic associations that place Judah, and by inference Joseph too, in a context far wider than that of their own individual personalities.

Reuben is the first-born of Jacob; yet it is not he but Judah, the fourth son, who rises to prominence in the Joseph narrative. It was Judah who suggested the sale of Joseph to the caravaneers (37:26f.), and it is he who will soon become the spokesman for his brothers to their father (43:3–5, 8–10). It is Judah who assumes a position of leadership when the delegation runs into trouble in Egypt (44:14–16) and who negotiates on behalf of the family for the release of the youngest brother (44:18–34). Finally, it is Judah whom Jacob selects to spearhead the migration to Egypt (46:28). So these narratives, while they recount the rise of Joseph, subtly register as well the ascendancy of Judah. The stage is being set for the future fulfillment of the divine promise to Abraham—“kings shall come forth from you” (17:6)—and to Jacob—“Kings shall issue from your loins” (35:11). Two kingdoms resulted from these divine promises to the patriarchs: Judah became the name of the southern kingdom, while the northern kingdom of Israel was known as Joseph (cf. Zech. 10:6). The present chapter, then, provides a foil to the Joseph-centered episodes. It hints, ever so obliquely, at the future Joseph-Judah polarity in the history of the people of Israel.

There is much in the narrative that testifies to great antiquity. Judah’s wanderings take place in the border regions of the future tribe, not in its main area of settlement. He is not portrayed as a conqueror or even as a settler. He is still a pastoral nomad, not a city dweller. There is no hostility or tension between him and the Canaanites; later tradition would hardly have invented the uncomfortable account about his marriage to one. Thus the image of the tribe of Judah reflected here is, in general, not that of the postconquest situation. As regards the social situation, the head of the family still has the power of life and death over its members. Moreover, the levirate institution here, unlike that of Deuteronomy 25:5–9, presupposes that the main obligation rests upon the father-in-law, allowing no possibility of voluntary renunciation by the brother-in-law. Finally, both the fact that no stigma is attached to what would, in later times, be the offspring of an incestuous marriage and the Narrator’s need to offer an apologia for Judah’s behavior (see Comment to v. 15f.) combine to confirm an early date for the details of the action.

JUDAH’S MARRIAGE (vv. 1–5)

1. About that time The phrase clearly intends to connect, in time, the sale of Joseph with the marriage of Judah.¹ However, the events here described can be compressed into the twenty-two years that elapsed between the sale of Joseph and the descent to Egypt, only on the assumption that Er was born about a year after Judah’s marriage and that Onan and Shelah followed in successive years. Er would then have been about eighteen when he married Tamar and died soon after, and Onan about seventeen when he repeated the experience of his brother. If Tamar waited a year in vain for Shelah before taking the initiative, the twins Perez and Zerah would have been born about twenty-one

Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua, and he married her and cohabited with her. ³She conceived and bore a son, and he named him Er. ⁴She conceived again and bore a son, and named him Onan. ⁵Once again she bore a son, and named him Shelah; he was at Chezib when she bore him.

יהודה בַּת־אִישׁ כְּנַעֲנִי וּשְׁמוֹ שׁוּעַ וַיִּקְחָהּ וַיְבֵא
אֵלֶיהָ: ³ וַתַּהַר וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַיִּקְרָא אֶת־שְׁמוֹ עֵר:
⁴ וַתַּהַר עוֹד וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַתִּקְרָא אֶת־שְׁמוֹ אוֹנָן:
⁵ וַתִּסֶּף עוֹד וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַתִּקְרָא אֶת־שְׁמוֹ שְׁלָה
וַהֲיָה בְכֵזִיב בְּלִדְתָהּ אֹתוֹ: ⁶ וַיִּקַּח יְהוּדָה אִשָּׁה

years after Judah's original marriage, which had taken place soon after the sale of Joseph. Thus they would have been about a year old upon arrival in Egypt. However, this assumption of a close temporal connection between the events of chapter 37 and Judah's marriage is clearly incompatible with the mention in 46:12 that two sons of Perez were in Jacob's company when he went down to Egypt. Accordingly, some modern scholars assign this last notice to a different strand of tradition. Others regard the Hebrew phraseology in 46:12 as indicating that Hezron and Hamul were not yet born and were included in the list simply for the sake of completeness (see Comment to 46:12). One or two traditional commentators treat the introductory formula "About that time" as a general phrase not meant to be precise, and they suppose that the marriage of Judah had occurred much earlier than the sale of Joseph. Against this is the clear intent of the phrase "About that time" in 21:22. Furthermore, the omission of the genealogy of Perez at the end of chapter 38, in contrast to 46:12, shows that no grandsons had been born within the time span encompassed by the events described in the chapter.

left his brothers Literally, "went down from . . .," that is, from the hill country of Hebron (37:12,14,32). One midrash (Tanḥ. B., Gen. 183) connects this event with the brothers' anger at Judah for his unfortunate advice, as given in Genesis 37:26f. The narrative reflects the isolation of Judah from the other tribes in premonarchic times caused by the presence of Canaanite enclaves. Deuteronomy 33:7 also alludes to this isolation: "Hear, O LORD, the voice of Judah / And restore him to his people."

Adullamite A man of Adullam, a city in the northern sector of the Judean *shefelah* (lowland), about 9 miles (14.4 km.) northeast of modern Beit Guvrin. This Canaanite royal city, captured by Joshua and made part of the tribal inheritance of Judah, was also associated with the life of David.²

2. Canaanite In 1 Chronicles 2:3, this identification is given to the wife herself. Simeon, too, had a Canaanite wife. In both cases it is the foreign woman who is absorbed into the Israelite tribe. Conscious of the later prohibition on intermarriage with Canaanites (Deut. 7:1,3), Jewish commentators have generally understood Hebrew *kena'ani* here in the sense of "merchant."³

daughter . . . Shua Her name is not recorded. In verse 12 she is termed "the daughter of Shua" (Heb. *bat-shua*). In 1 Chronicles 2:3 she is called "Bath-Shua the Canaanite woman." Bathsheba, David's wife, also appears in the variant form Bath-shua in 1 Chronicles 3:5.

3. he named him Some Hebrew manuscripts read here "she named," as do the Samaritan version and Targum Jonathan. According to that reading, the mother names all three sons (cf. Comment to v. 29).

Er No interpretation of the names of Judah's sons is given. Er was probably understood to mean "watchful, vigilant." A midrash and Targum Jonathan connect it with Hebrew *'ariri*, "childless."

4. Onan Possibly understood to mean "vigorous." Targum Jonathan and Genesis Rabba 85:5 connect the name with Hebrew *'on*, "grief."⁴

5. Shelah Perhaps meaning "drawn out" (namely, out of the womb).⁵

Chezib Doubtless, the city that is elsewhere called Achzib, situated in the territory of Judah, southwest of Adullam. Later the clan of Shelanites⁶ included a Cozeba among its descendants (1 Chron. 4:22). This clearly indicates that the clan had occupied the city of Chezib, and it explains why Judah's whereabouts are noted only in connection with Shelah. Because the Hebrew roots used

⁶Judah got a wife for Er his first-born; her name was Tamar. ⁷But Er, Judah's first-born, was displeasing to the LORD, and the LORD took his life. ⁸Then Judah said to Onan, "Join with your brother's wife and do your duty by her as a brother-in-law, and provide offspring for your brother." ⁹But Onan, knowing that the seed would not count as his, let it go to waste whenever he joined with his brother's wife, so as not to provide offspring for his brother. ¹⁰What he did

לְעַר בְּכֹרֹו וּשְׁמָהּ תָמָר: 7 וַיְהִי עֵר בְּכֹר יְהוּדָה
 הָע בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה וַיִּמְתְּהוּ יְהוָה: 8 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוּדָה
 לְאוֹנָן בָּא אֶל־אִשְׁתּוֹ אֹחִיךָ וַיְבִים אֵתָהּ וְהָקִם זָרַע
 לְאֹחִיךָ: 9 וַיִּבַּע אוֹנָן כִּי לֹא לוֹ יְהִי הַזָּרַע וְהָיָה
 אִם־בָּא אֶל־אִשְׁתּוֹ אֹחִיו וּשְׁחַת אֶרְצָה לְבִלְתִּי
 נִתְּן זָרַע לְאֹחִיו: 10 וַיִּבַּע בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה

here of clan and city—*k-z-v* and *sh-l-h*—both mean “to deceive, disappoint,” some commentators see here a word play referring to the mother’s disappointment at the absence of her husband or a suggestion of Tamar’s subsequent disappointment at not being given to Shelah.

THE LEVIRATE OBLIGATION (vv. 6–11)

6. Judah, the father, selects a bride for his son, as was the custom in biblical times.⁷

Tamar The word means “a palm tree.” As a personal name, it appears in the Bible only in the Davidic family.⁸

7. **displeasing** Hebrew *raʿ*, a word play on Er. The inversion of consonants may symbolize his disordering of nature (cf. Comment to 6:8). The text does not specify the sin, but as Bekhor Shor notes, it is that he refused to consummate the marriage, perhaps simply wishing to avoid having children. According to a rabbinic tradition, Er did not want Tamar’s beauty to be marred by pregnancy (Yev. 34b).

8. The death of Er without a son made Onan subject to the levirate law. Marriage between a man and his brother’s wife is strictly forbidden in the Pentateuchal legislation of Leviticus 18:16 and 20:21. The only exception to the prohibition occurs when the brother dies without a son. According to Deuteronomy 25:5, a man has an obligation to his widowed sister-in-law: “When brothers dwell together and one of them dies and leaves no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married to a stranger, outside the family. Her husband’s brother shall unite with her: take her as his wife and perform the levir’s duty.” This institution is known in Hebrew as *yibbum*, or “levirate marriage” (from Latin *levir*, “a husband’s brother”). The basic root meaning of the Hebrew is uncertain, but it is believed to be “to procreate.” In Deuteronomy 25:7, the brother of the deceased husband is called the *yavam* (? “progenitor”) and the widow *yevamah* (? “progenitrix”).

The levirate institution long antedated the Pentateuchal legislation. In fact, it is widely documented in one form or another in several extrabiblical sources. The compendium of laws from the Middle Assyrian Empire (15th–14th cent. B.C.E.) apparently provides that a widow who has no son should be married off by the father-in-law to the son of his choice (A, par. 33). The text, however, is fragmentary, and its full import and application are matters of scholarly dispute. Far more explicit are the Hittite laws (14th–13th cent. B.C.E.), which lay down that if a married man dies “his brother shall take his wife, then [if he dies] his father shall take her” (par. 193). The text does not distinguish between a childless widow and one who has offspring. A contract from the town of Nuzi from the middle centuries of the second millennium B.C.E. specifies that should the daughter-in-law be widowed, she is to be married to the second son and, if necessary, to the others in turn.

It is widely interpreted that the levirate institution had its origin in the notion that the widow had initially been purchased, through marriage, by the head of the family and so became part of the dead husband’s estate. As such, she remained the property of the clan after his death. At the same time, she would be assured of livelihood and protection.

provide offspring for your brother There was no requirement to name the son of such a union after the dead brother.⁹ This is evident from verses 29–30 and from Ruth 4:5, 10, and 17. Rather, the surviving brother became a surrogate for the deceased husband who posthumously gained a child, socially acknowledged to be his progeny and heir.

was displeasing to the LORD, and He took his life also.¹¹ Then Judah said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, “Stay as a widow in your father’s house until my son Shelah grows up”—for he thought, “He too might die like his brothers.” So Tamar went to live in her father’s house.

¹²A long time afterward, Shua’s daughter, the wife of Judah, died. When his period of mourning was over, Judah went up to Timnah to his sheepshearers, together with his friend Hirah the Adullamite. ¹³And Tamar was told, “Your father-in-law is coming up to Timnah for the sheep-shearing.” ¹⁴So she took off her widow’s garb, covered her

וַיָּמָת גַּם־אֶתֹּ: ¹¹ וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה לְתָמָר כְּלָתוֹ
שְׁבִי אִלְמָנָה בֵּית־אָבִיךָ עַד־יִגְדֵּל שְׁלָה בְנִי כִּי
אָמַר פְּנֵי־יָמֹת גַּם־הוּא כָּאֲחָיו וַתִּלְךְ תָּמָר וַתֵּשֶׁב
בֵּית אָבִיהָ: ¹² וַיְרַבּוּ הַיָּמִים וַתָּמָת בֵּת־שׁוּעַ
אִשְׁת־יְהוָה וַיִּנְחַם יְהוָה וַיַּעַל עַל־גִּזְוֵי צֶאֱנוּ
הוּא וְחִירָה רַעְהוּ הַעֲדֹלָמִי תַמְנָתָה: ¹³ וַיֵּגַד
לְתָמָר לֵאמֹר הִנֵּה חָמִיד עֹלָה תַמְנָתָה לְגוֹ צֶאֱנוּ:
¹⁴ וַתִּסֹּר בְּגָדֶיהָ אִלְמָנוּתָהּ מֵעַלֶיהָ וַתִּכְסֶּ בַּצִּעִיף

9. would not count as his The callous refusal of Onan to perpetuate the line of his brother may have been due to a lack of a sense of duty to the dead. An even more powerful motivation would have been the fact that with the death of the first-born, Onan inherits one-half of his father’s estate. However, should he provide an heir to his brother, his portion would be diminished.

let it go to waste Literally, “he let it spoil on the ground.” Genesis Rabba 55:5–6 understands that he practiced a primitive form of birth control through coitus interruptus. Another tradition (Yev. 34b) interprets the act as unnatural intercourse. Clearly, society at this time had made no provision for voluntary renunciation of the levirate duty as is found in Deuteronomy 25:7–9.

10. What he did was displeasing The text does not make clear specifically why Onan incurs divine wrath. The development of the narrative favors the explanation that it is due to the evasion of his obligation to his dead brother rather than because of the manner in which he acts. By frustrating the purpose of the levirate institution, Onan has placed his sexual relationship with his sister-in-law in the category of incest—a capital offense. The unusual emphasis given to the particular socio-legal background of the story clearly shows that the point at issue is the levirate obligation and not the general topic of birth control.

11. as a widow in your father’s house She was not free to remarry but could return to live with her parents, although still subject to the authority of her father-in-law (cf. v. 24).¹⁰

for he thought Judah had no intention of ever marrying her to Shelah.

THE DECEPTION OF JUDAH (vv. 12–26)

12. A long time afterward In accordance with the chronological scheme required by the present position of the narrative (see Comment to v. 1), about a year would have elapsed. In 1 Samuel 7:12, the same Hebrew phrase is defined as twenty years.

died The death of Judah’s wife is probably mentioned as an extenuating circumstance to account for his consorting with a harlot.

his period of mourning was over Literally, “he was comforted”; the official mourning rites had ended.

went up In contrast to “went down” (v. 1).

Timnah Probably not the locale of the Samson stories in Judges 14:1 but another place in the hill country of Judah, mentioned in Joshua 15:10,57.

sheepshearers See Comment to 31:19. The season of shearing was one of joy and revelry.¹¹

14. her widow’s garb The mode of dress characteristic of a widow in mourning.¹² It is not known of what it consisted or the length of time it was worn. In the case of Tamar, she may have continued to wear such clothing beyond the usual period as a symbol of the unfulfilled levirate obligation. At any rate, the presence of the widow’s garb (cf. v. 19) provides a tacit contrast with

face with a veil, and, wrapping herself up, sat down at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah; for she saw that Shelah was grown up, yet she had not been given to him as wife. ¹⁵When Judah saw her, he took her for a harlot; for she had covered her face. ¹⁶So he turned aside to her by the road and said, “Here, let me sleep with you”—for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. “What,” she asked, “will you pay for sleeping with me?” ¹⁷He replied, “I will send a kid from my flock.” But she said, “You must leave a pledge until you have sent it.” ¹⁸And he said, “What pledge shall I give you?” She replied, “Your seal and cord, and the staff which you carry.” So he gave them to her and slept with her, and she conceived by

וַתִּתְעַלֶּף וַתִּשָּׁב בַּפֶּתַח עֵינַיִם אֲשֶׁר עַל־הַרְדֵּד
 תַּמְנָתָהּ בִּי רָצָתָהּ בְּיַגְדַל שְׁלֵה וְהוּא לֹא־נִתְּנָה
 לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה: ¹⁵ וַיִּרְאֶה יְהוּדָה גִּיחֻשְׁבָּהּ לְזוֹנָה בִּי
 כִּסְתָהּ פָּנֶיהָ: ¹⁶ וַיֵּט אֵלֶיהָ אֶל־הַרְדֵּד וַיֹּאמֶר
 הֲבֵה־נָא אֲבוֹא אֵלֶיךָ בִּי לֹא יָדַע בִּי כְלָתוֹ הוּא
 וַתֹּאמֶר מַה־תִּתְּנֵנִי לִי בִּי תָבוֹא אֵלָי: ¹⁷ וַיֹּאמֶר
 אֲנֹכִי אֲשַׁלַּח גְּדִיעֵינִים מִן־הַצֹּאן וַתֹּאמֶר אִם־
 תִּתְּנֵנִי עַד שְׁלַחְךָ: ¹⁸ וַיֹּאמֶר מָה הָעֶרְבוֹן
 אֲשֶׁר אֶתְּנֶלְךָ וַתֹּאמֶר חֲתָמְךָ וּפְתִילְךָ וּמַטְּךָ
 אֲשֶׁר בְּיָדְךָ וַיִּתְּנֶלָּהּ וַיָּבֵא אֵלֶיהָ וַתַּהַר לוֹ:

Judah’s completion of his period of mourning (v. 12). At the same time, it forges a link with the story of Joseph, in which clothing also plays a role in deception.

a veil See Comment to 24:65. From verses 15 and 19, it is clear that Tamar was not normally veiled and that she simply wanted to conceal her identity (cf. 24:65). Interestingly, the Middle Assyrian laws (A, par. 40) require an unmarried cult prostitute and a harlot never to be veiled. The harlot who contravened this law was to be flogged fifty times, and pitch was to be poured on her head.

Enaim Probably to be identified with the village Enam in the territory of Judah.¹³

Shelah Nothing more is reported of him here, but his clan is mentioned in Numbers 26:20, and one of his sons was named Er, according to 1 Chronicles 4:21.

she had not been given Apparently, Tamar has no claim against Shelah, only against Judah. It seems that the responsibility for the enforcement of the levirate obligation rested at this time with the widow’s father-in-law, as in the Hittite laws (see Comment to v. 9). The legislation of Deuteronomy 25:5–10 modified the existing levirate institution by restricting the duty of *yibbum* to the brothers of the deceased.

15ff. The text is very careful to emphasize that had Judah known the identity of the woman, he would never have had relations with her: “she had covered her face”; “he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law” (v. 16): “he was not intimate with her again” (v. 26). All this is explication by the Narrator, who is conscious of the contradiction between the moral standards of his own, later age and the fact that the offspring of Judah’s venture with Tamar bore no stigma of illegitimacy.

17. a kid from my flock The fact that Judah carried nothing at that moment with which to pay for the woman’s services proves that he acted on impulse in “turning aside to her by the road”—another example of the biblical motif of God using human frailty for His own purposes.

a pledge Security to be held pending the fulfillment of the obligation.

18. seal . . . cord The reference is to the widely used cylinder seal, a small object made of a hard material, engraved with distinctive ornamentation. The center was hollowed out and a cord passed through so that the seal could be worn around the neck. When the cylinder was rolled over soft clay, the resultant impression served as a means of identifying personal possessions and of sealing and legitimating clay documents. It was a highly personal object that performed the function of the signature in modern society, a kind of extension of the personality. Judah leaves part of himself with Tamar when he gives her his seal.

staff Hebrew *matteh* can mean either “staff” or “scepter.” It is attested as the symbol of power and leadership in Isaiah 14:5 and Ezekiel 19:11–14, and also of royalty in Psalms 110:2. Numbers 17:17 states that each of the chieftains of the tribes of Israel in the wilderness had his own staff. Judah’s

him. ¹⁹Then she went on her way. She took off her veil and again put on her widow's garb.

²⁰Judah sent the kid by his friend the Adullamite, to redeem the pledge from the woman; but he could not find her. ²¹He inquired of the people of that town, "Where is the cult prostitute, the one at Enaim, by the road?" But they said, "There has been no prostitute here." ²²So he returned to Judah and said, "I could not find her; moreover, the townspeople said: There has been no prostitute here." ²³Judah said, "Let her keep them, lest we become a laughingstock. I did send her this kid, but you did not find her."

²⁴About three months later, Judah was told, "Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the harlot; in fact, she is with child by harlotry." "Bring her out," said Judah, "and

19 וַתִּקַּם וַתֵּלֶךְ וַתִּסְרֹךְ צְעִיפָהּ מֵעַלֶיהָ וַתִּלְבָּשׁ בְּגָדֵי אִלְמָנוּתָהּ: 20 וַיִּשְׁלַח יְהוּדָה אֶת־גְּדֵי הָעִזִּים בְּיַד הָעֹדֵלְמִי לְקַחַת הָעֶרְבוֹן מִיַּד הָאִשָּׁה וְלֹא מָצְאָהּ: 21 וַיִּשְׁאַל אֶת־אֲנָשֵׁי מְקוֹמָהּ לֵאמֹר אֵיךְ הַקְדֵּשָׁה הַזֹּאת בְּעִינֵינוּ עַל־הַדֶּרֶךְ וַיֹּאמְרוּ לֹא־הָיְתָה בָּזָה קֹדֶשֶׁה: 22 וַיָּשֶׁב אֶל־יְהוּדָה וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא מָצְאתִיהָ וְגַם אֲנָשֵׁי הַמְּקוֹם אָמְרוּ לֹא־הָיְתָה בָּזָה קֹדֶשֶׁה: 23 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוּדָה תִּקַּח־לָהּ פֶּן נִהְיֶה לְבוֹז הַנֶּהָ שְׁלַחְתִּי הַגְּדִי הַזֶּה וְאַתָּה לֹא מָצְאתָהּ: 24 וַיְהִי כַּמִּשְׁלָשׁ חֳדָשִׁים וַיִּגַּד לְיְהוּדָה לֵאמֹר זָנְתָה תַמָּר כַּלְתְּךָ וְגַם הֵנָּה הָרָה לְזַנוּנִים וַיֹּאמֶר

staff must have had some personalized identifying sign. Bronze staffs topped by small lions' heads have been found in Syria dating from the time of the Assyrian Empire (8th–7th cent. B.C.E.). Similar scepter heads, some incised with names, have been discovered over a wide area of the Near East.

Herodotus (Histories 1.195) reports that every Babylonian carried a seal and a stick with a carved ornamented top. Whether the same custom prevailed in Canaan in an earlier age is not known.

Judah must have been willing to part with these valuable identifying items temporarily only because he was a man of substance; for him the payment of a kid was inexpensive and could have been accomplished with ease in a very short while.

20. the woman The relationship had been so casual that he had not even bothered to find out her name.

21. cult prostitute Hebrew *kedeshah* seems to have referred to a woman who practiced prostitution in the service of a deity, probably in connection with a fertility cult. Deuteronomy 23:18 outlaws such an institution in Israel. The office of *qadishtu* is known from tablets listing Mesopotamian temple personnel and from Babylonian and Assyrian laws, but the nature of her religious function remains unclear.

It should be noted that the term "cult prostitute" is employed in the dialogue, whereas "harlot" appears in the narration (v. 15). Clearly, the use of "harlot" reveals the Israelite view of such a perversion of religion (cf. Hos. 4:14). It is possible that Hirah is expressing Canaanite notions or that he is deliberately using the term *kedeshah* to avoid embarrassment.

24. Judah was told He had not seen her himself because she had returned to her father's house (v. 11).

"Bring her out" To the city gate, where justice was administered (see Comment to 19:1). The order has a magisterial ring to it.¹⁴ By virtue of his status as head of the family, Judah here exercises his power of life and death (see Comment to 31:32), even though Tamar lives with her parents.

"let her be burned" The tie between the childless widow and the levir exists automatically from the moment of widowhood. Tamar's status was thus what is termed *shomeret yavam* ("awaiting the levir") in rabbinic parlance, and any extralevirate sexual relationship would have been adulterous. This offense carries the death penalty in biblical legislation, as specified in Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:22, though the particular mode of execution is not stated. In rabbinic tradition, all cases of unspecified capital punishment involve strangulation (Sanh. 52b). In other instances in the Bible, the mode of execution for sexual crimes is stoning by the public (Deut. 22:21,24; cf. Ezek. 16:40). Death by burning is prescribed only in two cases mentioned in Leviticus 20:14 and 21:9. Judah's extreme verdict may reflect contemporary Canaanite practice. Ramban raises the possibility that the exceptional severity of the punishment was dictated by Judah's exalted status, so that the

let her be burned.”²⁵ As she was being brought out, she sent this message to her father-in-law, “I am with child by the man to whom these belong.” And she added, “Examine these: whose seal and cord and staff are these?”²⁶ Judah recognized them, and said, “She is more in the right than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah.” And he was not intimate with her again.

²⁷When the time came for her to give birth, there were twins in her womb! ²⁸While she was in labor, one of them put out his hand, and the midwife tied a crimson thread on that hand, to signify: This one came out first. ²⁹But just then he drew back his hand, and out came his brother; and she said, “What a breach you have made for yourself!” So he was named Perez. ³⁰Afterward his brother came out, on whose hand was the crimson thread; he was named Zerah.

והוֹדָה הוֹצִיאָוּהָ וְתִשְׁרֶף: ²⁵ הוּא מוֹצֵאת וְהִיא שְׁלַחָה אֶל-חַמִּיָּה לֵאמֹר לְאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר-אֵלֶּה לִּי אֲנֹכִי הָרָה וְתֹאמַר הַפְּרִיָּא לְמִי הַחֲתָמֹת וְהַפְּתִילִים וְהַמַּטֶּה הָאֵלֶּה: ²⁶ וַיִּבֶר יְהוּדָה וַיֹּאמֶר צְרָקָה מִמֶּנִּי כִּי-עַל-כֵּן לֹא-נָתַתִּיהָ לְשִׁלָּה בְנִי וְלֹא-יָסַף עוֹד לְדַעְתָּהּ: ²⁷ וַיְהִי בְעֵת לִדְתָהּ וְהִנֵּה תֹאמִים בְּבֶטְנָהּ: ²⁸ וַיְהִי בְלִדְתָהּ וַיִּתְּנֶה וַתִּקַּח הַמִּילְדָּת וַתִּקְשֶׁר עַל-יָדוֹ שָׁנִי לֵאמֹר זֶה יֵצֵא רִאשׁוֹנָה: ²⁹ וַיְהִי כִּמְשִׁיב יָדוֹ וְהִנֵּה יֵצֵא אַחִיו וַתֹּאמֶר מַה-פְּרַצְתָּ עָלַיךָ פָּרִץ וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ פָּרִץ: ³⁰ וְאַחֲרַי יֵצֵא אַחִיו אֲשֶׁר עַל-יָדוֹ הַשָּׁנִי וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ זֶרַח: ס חמישי

violation of family honor was felt all the more keenly. Another possibility is that the body was to be burned after the administration of death by stoning. An analogous case is that of Achan who was ordered to be burned for violating the ban on Jericho but who, in practice, was first executed by public stoning and then burned. This is related in Joshua 7:15,25.

25. The dramatic denouement comes as Tamar, who has sustained her remarkable self-restraint until the very last moment, confronts Judah with the at once overwhelming and unimpeachable evidence. Yet her tactic of indirect accusation assures a minimum of embarrassment and so elicits a noble response.

26. *he was not intimate with her again* See Comment to verse 15. There is a distinction between the levirate law of Deuteronomy 25:5 and this incident. There the widow becomes her brother-in-law’s wife; here it would appear that Tamar has only a clear right to conceive a child but no claim on marriage. Again, the narrative reflects a much earlier sociojuridical stratum than the Pentateuchal legislation.

THE BIRTH OF THE TWINS (vv. 27–30)

27. *When the time came . . . twins* Unlike in Rebekah’s case, as told in 25:24, twins were apparently not expected.¹⁵

twins Perhaps in compensation for Judah’s two deceased sons.

28. *came out first* The narrative seems to echo a history of rivalry between the two clans and is to be compared with 25:22–23.

29. *she said* That is, the midwife.

breach Hebrew *perets*. This is a play on Perez, the only name in this chapter for which an explanation is given, a fact that reflects the preeminence of the Perezite clan within the tribe of Judah. David was descended from Perez, according to Ruth 4:18–22 and 1 Chronicles 2:5, 9–15. The fact that ten generations separate David from Perez—symbolic of a complete and significant unit of time (see Comment to chap. 5)—shows that the birth of Perez is taken to be a historic turning point.

So he was named Literally, “so he called his name”; that is, Judah did, basing himself on the midwife’s words. Some ancient versions read here “she called.”¹⁶

30. *Zerah* No interpretation of the name is given. The Hebrew stem means “brightness,” which suggests an allusion to the crimson thread. The Zerahites were a clan of Judah.¹⁷

39 When Joseph was taken down to Egypt, a certain Egyptian, Potiphar, a courtier of Pharaoh and his chief steward, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him there. ²The LORD was with Joseph, and he was a successful man; and he stayed in the house of his Egyptian master. ³And when his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD lent success to everything he undertook, ⁴he took a liking to Joseph. He made him his personal

ל"ט וְיֹסֵף הוֹרְדָה מִצְרַיִם וַיְקַנְהוּ פוֹטִיפָר סָרִיס פְּרֹעֶה שֶׁר הַטַּבָּחִים אִישׁ מִצְרַיִם מִיַּד הַיִּשְׁמַעֲאֵלִים אֲשֶׁר הוֹרְדוּהוּ שָׁמָּה: ² וַיְהִי יְהוָה אִתּוֹ וַיִּשְׁפֹּר וַיְהִי אִישׁ מַצְלִיחַ וַיְהִי בְּבַיִת אֲדֹנָיו הַמִּצְרַיִם: ³ וַיֵּרָא אֲדֹנָיו כִּי יְהוָה אִתּוֹ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר-הוּא עֹשֶׂה יְהוָה מַצְלִיחַ בְּיָדוֹ: ⁴ וַיִּמְצָא יוֹסֵף חֵן

CHAPTER 39

Joseph in Potiphar's Household (vv. 1–23)

1. Resuming the story of Joseph, the narrative now recapitulates the concluding verses of chapter 37.

a certain Egyptian The national identity of Joseph's master is repeated three times for emphasis (vv. 1,2,5), probably because the sale of Joseph into Egyptian slavery sets the stage for the looming enslavement and subsequent redemption of Israel. The prophecy of 15:13 to Abraham is being fulfilled.

Potiphar So 37:36. The full name and titles are here given to draw attention to the aristocratic nature of the household into which Joseph is sold, a detail essential to the development of the story. Otherwise, the name of the master is of no significance—indeed is not mentioned again.

2. *The LORD* The divine name YHVH, used only in this chapter of the Joseph story,¹ is confined exclusively to the narrative framework and never used in speech. The preference for this proper name of the God of Israel, as opposed to the generic 'elohim, is determined by an underlying intent to emphasize that the unfolding events in the odyssey of Joseph are key elements in God's plan for the people of Israel. The use of YHVH gives an appropriate nuance to this wider national inflection in the narrative.

was with Joseph This seminal phrase appears four times in this chapter,² forming a literary framework within which the narrative is encased. The repetitious use of the phrase imparts coherence and meaning to what superficially appear to be merely random events. The phrase enables the reader to understand how the spoiled lad of seventeen, utterly alone in a foreign land and in dire adversity, suddenly matures and acquires great strength of character. He can rise again and again in situations that would surely have crushed others.

a successful man The phrase expresses the idea that innate gifts of intelligence and skill cannot achieve fruition without divine support.³

he stayed in the house The first of four stages in the rise of Joseph. He is not sent to work in the fields. It was not uncommon for slaves in Egypt to be employed in professional tasks such as household management and the administration of property. This situation is illustrated by an Egyptian papyrus (Brooklyn 35.1446) deriving from 1833–1742 B.C.E., which lists the names of nearly eighty slaves in an Egyptian household, together with their occupations. Strangely, the Asian slaves clearly enjoyed superior status and performed the skilled jobs while the Egyptian slaves were given the more onerous and strenuous labors in the fields. By working in the house, Joseph has the opportunity to display his administrative talents and to win the favor of his master. But he is also brought into close and constant contact with his master's wife!

3. *when his master saw* Joseph's competence in fulfilling his duties—not here specified (cf. vv. 11,22)—is visible proof to the master of divine support for his slave.⁴

4. *he took a liking* Literally, "Joseph found favor in his eyes."⁵ He wins the esteem and confidence of his master—the second stage in his rise.

attendant and put him in charge of his household, placing in his hands all that he owned. ⁵And from the time that the Egyptian put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the LORD blessed his house for Joseph's sake, so that the blessing of the LORD was upon everything that he owned, in the house and outside. ⁶He left all that he had in Joseph's hands and, with him there, he paid attention to nothing save the food that he ate. Now Joseph was well built and handsome.

⁷After a time, his master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph and said, "Lie with me." ⁸But he refused. He said to his

בְּעֵינָיו וַיִּשְׁרֶת אֹתוֹ וַיִּפְקְדֵהוּ עַל-בֵּיתוֹ וְכָל-יִשְׁרָאֵל לֹא נָתַן בְּיָדוֹ: 5 וַיְהִי מֵאִזְּ הַפְּקִיד אֹתוֹ בְּבֵיתוֹ וְעַל כָּל-אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁלֹו וַיִּבְרַךְ יְהוָה אֶת-בֵּית הַמִּצְרָיִם בְּגִלְלַל יוֹסֵף וַיְהִי בִרְבַת יְהוָה בְּכָל-אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁלֹו בְּבֵית וּבְשָׂדֵה: 6 וַיַּעֲזֹב כָּל-אֲשֶׁר-לֹו בְּיַד-יוֹסֵף וְלֹא-יָרַע אֹתוֹ מֵאֹמֶה כִּי אִם-הִלָּחַם אֲשֶׁר-הוּא אוֹכֵל וַיְהִי יוֹסֵף יִפְהֶ-תָאֵר וַיִּפֶה מֵרֵאָה: שִׁשִּׁי 7 וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַתִּשָּׂא אִשְׁת־אֲדֹנָיו אֶת-עֵינֶיהָ אֶל-יוֹסֵף וַתֹּאמֶר שְׁכַבְהָ עִמִּי: 8 וַיִּמָּאֵן

his personal attendant Compare Exodus 24:13; 2 Kings 6:15. This is the third stage.

in charge of his household The fourth and final rung on the ladder of success. Joseph is now overseer of the entire estate, a function that conforms to that of the title frequently encountered in Egyptian texts as *mer-per*, "comptroller."

5. *the LORD blessed* That is, He brought great prosperity to the master.⁶

in the house and outside Literally, "in the house and in the field." The phrase is a merism, a figure of speech that combines two contrasting elements to express totality.

6. Joseph has now reached the pinnacle of his career as a servant in the wealthy household, having won his Egyptian master's complete and unqualified confidence in his ability and integrity.

He left . . . in Joseph's hands The Hebrew phrase *ʿ-^{z-v} beyad* in place of the usual *n-t-n beyad*, as in verses 4, 8, and 22, is unique, for elsewhere the phrase *ʿ-^{z-v} beyad* means "to abandon to the power of" and has a negative connotation, as in Psalms 37:33 and Nehemiah 9:28. The exceptional style here is probably a deliberate literary device to hint at impending evil and to allude to a cause-and-effect connection with verses 12, 13, and 15, which employ the same phrase but in a different association.

the food that he ate In view of the parallel passage in verse 9, early exegesis understood the term as a euphemism for "wife." Support for this may be found in Proverbs 30:20: "Such is the way of an adulteress: / She eats, wipes her mouth, / And says, 'I have done no wrong.'" An alternative interpretation sees a connection with the ritual separation said to have been practiced by Egyptians at meals, mentioned in 43:32.⁷

well built and handsome No other male is so described in Scripture. The Hebrew phrase also is used of Rachel, Joseph's mother, in 29:17. Joseph's physical attractiveness is not mentioned as an element in Jacob's favoritism or as an additional cause of his brothers' envy. Its insertion here serves solely to introduce the next episode.

THE ATTEMPTED SEDUCTION (vv. 7–20)

Has Joseph's success corroded his moral fiber? His character is about to be put to the test. The picture of Joseph as it emerges from the pages of this narrative is far different from that of the boy back in his father's home. So skillfully is the story set forth that, in our sympathy and admiration for the hero's nobility of character, we forget those displeasing traits that alienated us at the outset. Joseph is now the unwitting instrument of God's providence, and his behavior in the face of temptation demonstrates his worthiness for the role.

7. *After a time* Sufficient time has elapsed for Joseph's relative independence and authority to be accepted as commonplace.

master's wife, "Look, with me here, my master gives no thought to anything in this house, and all that he owns he has placed in my hands. ⁹He wields no more authority in this house than I, and he has withheld nothing from me except yourself, since you are his wife. How then could I do this most wicked thing, and sin before God?" ¹⁰And much as she coaxed Joseph day after day, he did not yield to her request to lie beside her, to be with her.

¹¹One such day, he came into the house to do his work. None of the household being there inside, ¹²she caught

וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-אִשְׁתּוֹ אֲדֹנָיו הֲנִי אֲדֹנֶיךָ לֹא-יָדַע אֶתִּי מִה-בְּבַיִת וְכָל אֲשֶׁר-יִשְׁלֹו נָתַן בְּיָדֵי: ⁹ אֵינְנִי גָדוֹל בְּבַיִת הַזֶּה מִמְּנִי וְלֹא-חָשַׁד מִמְּנִי מֵאוֹמֶה כִּי אִם-אוֹתָךְ בְּאִשְׁרֵךְ אֶת-אִשְׁתּוֹ וְאִיךָ אֶעֱשֶׂה הֲרָעָה הַגְּדוֹלָה הַזֹּאת וְחָטַאתִי לָאֱלֹהִים: ¹⁰ וַיְהִי כִּדְבַרָּה אֶל-יוֹסֵף יוֹסֵף וְיֹסֵף וְלֹא-שָׁמַע אֲלֶיהָ לִשְׁכַּב אֶצְלָהּ לְהִזְוֹת עִמָּה: ¹¹ וַיְהִי כִּהְיוֹם הַהוּא וַיָּבֹא הַבַּיִתָּה לַעֲשׂוֹת מְלֶאכְתּוֹ וְאִין אִישׁ מֵאֲנָשֵׁי הַבַּיִת שָׁם בְּבַיִת: ¹² וַתִּתְּפֹשֶׁהוּ בְּבִגְדוֹ לֵאמֹר

his master's wife She remains nameless throughout the story.⁸ Her designation serves a dual purpose. It draws attention to Joseph's dilemma in antagonizing someone so powerful, and it emphasizes the inherent irony of the situation: She, the mistress of the house, is a slave to her lust for her husband's slave!

cast her eyes upon With longing,⁹ lasciviously.

Lie with me There are no verbal preliminaries, no expressions of love. Her peremptory mode of speech flows from her consciousness of Joseph's status as a slave. In no other biblical narrative does a woman brazenly proposition a man in this manner.¹⁰

8-9. Joseph's spontaneous response is a categorical no. His moral excellence can be appreciated all the more if one remembers that he is a slave and that sexual promiscuity was a perennial feature of all slave societies. Moreover, an ambitious person might well have considered that the importuning woman had presented him with a rare opportunity to advance his personal and selfish interests.

Conscious of his subordinate position, Joseph dares not display anger. Nor does he preach. He only explains his personal reasons for refusing her advances, and he presents these in an order that reflects his perception of her hierarchy of values. First he points to the abuse of trust that would be involved, then to the violation of the husband's proprietary rights over his wife, then to the religious and moral nature of the offense. The second of these reasons reflects pagan legal theory that adultery was largely a private injury, an affront and indignity to the husband. The third line of argument conforms to the distinctive Israelite concept of morality as having its source and sanction in divine will, not in social convention or utilitarian considerations.

before God Joseph here uses 'elohim, not YHVH, because he is speaking to one of another people.

10. The woman does not reply to Joseph's arguments. Her tactic is to wear down his resistance by her relentless importuning.

she coaxed Hebrew *ke-dabberah*, the verb indicating repeated speech (cf. vv. 17,19).

to lie beside . . . to be with . . . The unique usage of the Hebrew preposition 'etsel in this context may indicate that she moderated her demands on him. In that case, as Rashbam suggests, the second clause would mean simply "to be in her company." Another possibility is that the phrase "to be with her" is a euphemism for sexual intercourse, as in 2 Samuel 13:20, in which case the clauses express successive states of intimacy.

11. *into the house* As 43:26 shows, Hebrew *ha-baytah* means "into the interior of the house."¹¹

to do his work Not here specified (cf. vv. 3,22), but excluding menial labor. Early exegesis, as reflected in the Targums, has Joseph attending to his master's accounts. A rabbinic tradition (Sot. 36b) interprets the phrase as a euphemism: Joseph actually succumbed to the woman's blandishments, but at the critical moment a mental image of his father inhibited him from sinning.

there inside In that part of the house—not necessarily that no one was around (cf. v. 14).

hold of him by his garment and said, “Lie with me!” But he left his garment in her hand and got away and fled outside. ¹³When she saw that he had left it in her hand and had fled outside, ¹⁴she called out to her servants and said to them, “Look, he had to bring us a Hebrew to dally with us! This one came to lie with me; but I screamed loud. ¹⁵And when he heard me screaming at the top of my voice, he left his garment with me and got away and fled outside.” ¹⁶She

שָׁכְבָה עִמִּי וַיַּעֲזֹב בְּגָדוֹ בְּיָדָהּ וַיֵּנָס וַיֵּצֵא הַחֹצֵצָה: ¹³ וַיְהִי פְּרָאוֹתָהּ פִּי־עֵזֹב בְּגָדוֹ בְּיָדָהּ וַיֵּנָס הַחֹצֵצָה: ¹⁴ וַתִּקְרָא לְאֲנָשֵׁי בֵּיתָהּ וַתֹּאמֶר לָהֶם לֹא־מָרָא רָאוּ הֵבִיא לָנוּ אִישׁ עִבְרִי לְצַחֵק בְּנוּ בְּאֵי אֵלַי לְשַׁכַּב עִמִּי וַאֲקַרְא בְּקוֹל גָּדוֹל: ¹⁵ וַיְהִי כְּשָׁמְעוּ פִּי־הַרִימֹתִי קוֹלִי וַאֲקַרְא וַיַּעֲזֹב בְּגָדוֹ אֶצְלִי וַיֵּנָס וַיֵּצֵא הַחֹצֵצָה: ¹⁶ וַתִּנָּח בְּגָדוֹ אֶצְלָהּ

12. she caught hold Her verbal assaults having failed to achieve their end, she resorts in desperation and frustration to physical aggression.¹²

garment The loose-fitting outer garment of the well-to-do, which was removed on entering the house. The poor usually possessed only one garment (Exod. 22:26; Deut. 24:13). The use of Hebrew *beqed* (six times), a general term for clothing, in place of the regular *me'il*, evokes an association with the homonymous Hebrew stem *b-g-d* employed for marital infidelity.¹³

got away and fled Literally, “he fled (*va-yanos*) and went out (*va-yetse'*) to the outside.” The first verb describes his spontaneous and abrupt withdrawal from the room; the second suggests the assumption of a normal gait, once outside, in order not to attract attention.

13–18. The turn of events must have left the wife terror-stricken at her vulnerability should the truth get out, while her feeling of anger and humiliation fueled a desire for revenge. Realizing that the abandoned coat can serve as prima facie evidence for a case against Joseph, she loses no time in accusing him of committing the acts she had wanted him to perpetrate.

13. had fled outside For the sake of brevity, the second verb is omitted in the recapitulation.

14. and said Hebrew *va-to'mer*, indicating a succinct report (cf. vv. 7,10,17).

to her servants Literally, “the people of her house,” who are in another part of the building.

Look She may have held up the coat for all to see, but, more likely, Hebrew *re'u* is just a synonym of the demonstrative *hinneh*, “behold.”¹⁴

he had to bring us The subject is indefinite, but verse 17 indicates that the sarcasm refers to her husband.

a Hebrew Whatever the origin of the term (see Comment to 14:13), there seems to be no doubt of a derogatory intent here. In contrast to her report to her husband (v. 17), the woman does not term Joseph a slave. She artfully knows how to adjust her language to the needs of the situation. In addressing her domestics, probably Egyptians, she appeals to their suspicion of foreigners and flatteringly employs the plural “us” (contrast v. 17), as though to imply that Joseph is threatening their common values and that she and they have mutual interests to defend that erase differences in class and status.

to dally The Hebrew stem *ts-h-k* is the same as that used in 26:8, though with a different preposition (here *b*; there *'et*). It can also mean simply “to mock us, insult us” (cf. v. 17).

I screamed The scream was regarded as evidence of resistance to attempted rape and, hence, was a sign of innocence, as is formulated in Deuteronomy 22:24, 27. She well knows that none of those to whom she speaks had been close enough to hear her (v. 11).

15. with me The same phraseology as in the report to her husband (v. 18), but she subtly avoids mentioning that the garment was left in her hand (vv. 12,13).

and fled outside See Comment to verse 12. Again she is cautious in her formulation, just in case anyone might have seen Joseph leaving her room and walking normally.

kept his garment beside her, until his master came home. ¹⁷Then she told him the same story, saying, “The Hebrew slave whom you brought into our house came to me to dally with me; ¹⁸but when I screamed at the top of my voice, he left his garment with me and fled outside.”

¹⁹When his master heard the story that his wife told him, namely, “Thus and so your slave did to me,” he was furious. ²⁰So Joseph’s master had him put in prison, where the king’s prisoners were confined. But even while he was there in prison, ²¹the LORD was with Joseph: He extended

עֲדִיבֹא אֲדָנָיו אֶל־בֵּיתוֹ: ¹⁷ וַתְּדַבֵּר אֵלָיו בְּדִבְרֵים הָאֵלֶּה לֵאמֹר בְּאֵלֵי הָעֶבֶד הָעֵבְרִי אֲשֶׁר־הֵבֵאתָ לָנוּ לְצַחֵק בֵּי: ¹⁸ וַיְהִי כַּהְרִמִּי קוֹלִי וַאֲקֹרֵא וַיַּעֲזֹב בְּגָדוֹ אֶצְלִי וַיָּנֶס הַחֹצֵצָה: ¹⁹ וַיְהִי כַשְׂמַע אֲדָנָיו אֶת־דִּבְרֵי אִשְׁתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר דִּבְרָה אֵלָיו לֵאמֹר בְּדִבְרֵים הָאֵלֶּה עָשָׂה לִי עֲבָדְךָ וַיִּחַר אַפּוֹ: ²⁰ וַיִּקַּח אֲדָנָיו יוֹסֵף אֹתוֹ וַיִּתְּנֵהוּ אֶל־בַּיִת הַסֹּהַר מִלְּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר־אֲסוּרֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲסוּרִים וַיְהִי־שָׁם בְּבַיִת הַסֹּהַר: ²¹ וַיְהִי יְהוָה אֶת־יוֹסֵף וַיִּט אֵלָיו

ו. 20. אֲסִירֵי ק

16. his master Not “her husband,” since it was in the capacity of slavemaster that she would confront him.

17. Hebrew slave This time she emphasizes Joseph’s slave status (cf. v. 14).

into our house Literally, “to us,” as though to say, “The whole house suffers from him.” Cunningly, however, she goes on to use the singular, “to dally with me,” not “us,” as before—a fine psychological touch designed to arouse her husband’s jealous instincts and sense of outrage. Significantly, she does not repeat to her husband her previously stated charge of attempted rape. This omission was probably a powerful factor in saving Joseph from the executioner. Perhaps she secretly nourishes the hope that, by having Joseph incarcerated, she might be able to break his spirit and finally get him to succumb to her.

19. he was furious The text does not say at whom, an omission that may hint at an underlying ambivalence in his reaction. He must also have resented losing the services of so accomplished an administrator as Joseph.

20. had him put Literally, “took him and put him.” It is known that high administrative officials in the Egyptian government also performed judicial functions.

in prison Hebrew *beit ha-sohar*, perhaps deriving from a stem *s-h-r*, “to be round” (cf. Song 7:3), which appears in postbiblical Hebrew as *sahar*, “moon,” “enclosed area.” Employed eight times in this narrative, but nowhere else, *beit ha-sohar* may then be, literally, “a house of enclosure,” “a prison fortress.” It might also be an as yet unidentified foreign term. At any rate, the prison detail is characteristically Egyptian, for the punishment of imprisonment was unknown in ancient Near Eastern law but is well attested in Egyptian documents. The prison, of which there was one in each town of any size, served as a penal institution for convicted criminals, as a labor camp for those forced into the *corvée*, and as the seat of the criminal court. In the present instance, the prison is under the jurisdiction of Joseph’s master and is housed on his property, as is clear from 40:3,7 and 41:10; compare Jeremiah 37:15f. This recalls an Egyptian papyrus (Leiden I.368.7–9), which tells of slaves who were committed to “the little prison of the Overseer of the Treasury.”

where the king’s prisoners . . . Being an officer of the court, Potiphar puts Joseph in the section reserved for royal prisoners, a detail vital to the understanding of the next episode. Why does Joseph escape execution, which would certainly have been the fate of a slave who attempted to assault his master’s wife sexually? Is it because of Potiphar’s extreme fondness for him, or because he really doubts the veracity of the woman’s story?¹⁵ Support for the latter notion might be sought in the vague description of his reaction upon hearing the accusation in verse 19 and in the unusual fivefold repetition of forms of the Hebrew stem *d-b-r* (vv. 17,19; cf. v. 10) as opposed to the previous use of the verb *’-m-r* (vv. 7,14); there is an implication here that a profusion of words is needed on the part of the wife to overcome her husband’s reluctance to accept her story. As has already been noted, she did not explicitly report to her husband, as she had to the domestics (v. 14), that Joseph had intended to rape her (v. 17). Furthermore, it must not be assumed that Joseph silently accepted his unjust fate. The narrative is mute on this point; but it also recorded no reaction from Joseph when he was thrown into

kindness to him and disposed the chief jailer favorably toward him. ²²The chief jailer put in Joseph's charge all the prisoners who were in that prison, and he was the one to carry out everything that was done there. ²³The chief jailer did not supervise anything that was in Joseph's charge, because the LORD was with him, and whatever he did the LORD made successful.

חָסַד וַיִּתֵּן חָנוּ בְּעֵינַי שֶׁר בַּיַּת־הַסֵּהֶר: ²² וַיִּתֵּן שֶׁר בַּיַּת־הַסֵּהֶר בְּיַד־יוֹסֵף אֶת כָּל־הַאֲסוּרִים אֲשֶׁר בְּבַיַּת הַסֵּהֶר וְאֶת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר עֹשִׂים שָׁם הוּא הָיָה עֹשֶׂה: ²³ אֵינִן שֶׁר בַּיַּת־הַסֵּהֶר רֹאֵה אֶת־כָּל־מְאֹמָה בְּיָדוֹ בְּאֲשֶׁר יְהוּה אִתּוֹ וְאֲשֶׁר־הוּא עֹשֶׂה יְהוּה מַצְלִיחַ: ס שְׁבִיעִי

40 Some time later, the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt gave offense to their lord the king of Egypt.

מ וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה תִּטְאוּ מִשְׁקָה מְלֹךְ־מִצְרַיִם וְהֶאֱפָה לְאַדְנֵיהֶם לְמֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם:

the pit (chap. 37), while a subsequent incident reveals that he had indeed pleaded with his brothers for his life (42:21). Here, too, it is reasonable to assume that he defends his innocence in a manner that at least raises some doubts about his guilt in his master's mind. It is also pertinent to mention here that there are many versions in ancient literature of the motif of the blameless accused who honorably repels the amorous advances of a married woman, and that the innocent victim generally escapes death. On this topic, see Excursus 29.

IMPRISONMENT (vv. 20–23)

20. *But even while* Literally, “He was there in prison.” To avoid the apparent redundancy of the clause, Radak took it to mean “he remained there,” that is, he had no expectation of release. However, it is better to attach the phrase to the next verse, as is done in this translation, following Shadal. This has the advantage of making verse 21 almost exactly parallel to verse 2.

21. When Joseph was a slave in Potiphar's household “God was with him” and gave him success in his work, thereby enabling him to win his master's favor. Here in prison he is at the lowest point of his fortunes, forlorn and helpless. According to the tradition in Psalms 105:17–18, Joseph's feet were placed in fetters and an iron collar was put around his neck. God is again “with him,” but Joseph has no opportunity as yet to prove himself. He first needs divine *hesed* (see Comment to 24:12) to gain the prison keeper's favor.

22. *The chief jailer* The jailer, who is responsible to the chief steward (cf. 40:3f.), gives Joseph administrative duties not here specified (cf. vv. 3,11).

23. This verse parallels verses 3 and 6.

CHAPTER 40

Joseph in Prison (vv. 1–23)

1. *Some time later* An indefinite statement. See Comments to 51:1 and 21:1. We may calculate that Joseph is now twenty-eight years old, for we know that in another two years, when he appears before Pharaoh, he is then thirty.¹ Eleven years have elapsed since his sale into slavery; but we have no way of determining how many of those years he spent in the service of Potiphar and how many in prison.

the cupbearer . . . the baker The next verse identifies them as the respective chief officials of their professions in the royal household. Since the cupbearer is crucial to the narrative, he is always mentioned first.

²Pharaoh was angry with his two courtiers, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker, ³and put them in custody, in the house of the chief steward, in the same prison house where Joseph was confined. ⁴The chief steward assigned Joseph to them, and he attended them.

When they had been in custody for some time, ⁵both of them—the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt, who were confined in the prison—dreamed in the same night, each his own dream and each dream with its own meaning. ⁶When Joseph came to them in the morning, he saw that they were distraught. ⁷He asked Pharaoh’s courtiers, who were with him in custody in his master’s house, saying, “Why do you appear downcast today?” ⁸And they

2 וַיִּקְצֹף פַּרְעֹה עַל שְׁנֵי סְרִיסָיו עַל שֵׁר הַמְּשָׁקִים וְעַל שֵׁר הָאֹפִים: 3 וַיִּתֵּן אֹתָם בְּמִשְׁמַר בֵּית שֵׁר הַטְּבָחִים אֶל־בֵּית הַסֵּהר מְקוֹם אֲשֶׁר יוֹסֵף אֶסְוֵר שָׁם: 4 וַיִּפְקֹד שֵׁר הַטְּבָחִים אֶת־יוֹסֵף אֹתָם וַיִּשְׂדֶּת אֹתָם וַיְהִי יָמִים בְּמִשְׁמַר: 5 וַיִּחְלְמוּ חֲלוֹם שְׁנֵיהֶם אִישׁ חֲלֹמוֹ בְּלַיְלָה אֶחָד אִישׁ כְּפַתְרוֹן חֲלֹמוֹ הַמְּשָׁקָה וְהָאֹפֶה אֲשֶׁר לְמֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר אֶסְוֵרִים בְּבֵית הַסֵּהר: 6 וַיָּבֹא אֲלֵיהֶם יוֹסֵף בְּבֹקֶר וַיִּרְא אֹתָם וְהֵגַם זַעֲפִים: 7 וַיִּשְׁאַל אֶת־סְרִיסָיו פַּרְעֹה אֲתוֹ בְּמִשְׁמַר בֵּית אֲדֹנָיו לָאֵמַר מִדּוּעַ פְּנֵיכֶם רָעִים הַיּוֹם:

The cupbearer was an important official in the Egyptian court. Because of the sensitivity of his position—he personally served wine to the king—his loyalty in what was a perpetually intrigue-ridden household had to be beyond reproach. Ready access to the monarch could make a savvy cupbearer a trusted advisor and place him in a position of great influence. Egyptian documents testify to the wealth and power of such officials.

the king of Egypt This title (so v. 15), in place of the otherwise invariable mention of Pharaoh, takes up the point of 39:20.

gave offense The details, being irrelevant to the narrative, are ignored.

2. The specific mention of the two men, following the general statement regarding the officials, may be intended as an indication that the offenses of the two were separate and distinct. This explains why they eventually received different treatment at the hands of Pharaoh.

3. *in custody* Hebrew *be-mishmar*, that is, in temporary detention pending final disposition of their case.²

4. *The chief steward* That is, Joseph’s own master, on whose estate the prison was situated. The cupbearer later characterizes Joseph as “a servant of the chief steward.”³

When . . . for some time Literally, “There were days. . . .” Hebrew *yamim* may indicate indefinite time⁴ or “a year.” In the latter case, as their confinement ended on the royal birthday, their offenses could have been committed in connection with the celebration of the preceding birthday, as Shadal suggests.

5. *both of them* For dreams in pairs, see Comment to 37:9. In this case, the two are needed to establish Joseph’s reputation as an interpreter of dreams⁵ (cf. 41:11–13). Joseph’s own dreams caused his misfortunes. Now the dreams of others lead to his prosperity.

dreamed See Comment to 37:5–11.

each . . . own meaning Literally, “each according to the interpretation of his dream”—the same phrase used by the cupbearer later, in 41:11. The Hebrew can be variously taken to mean that the interpretation turned out to be appropriate to the content or that each dreamed as if his dream were a prediction.

6. *distraught* The anxiety normally brought on by the accepted seriousness of dreams is here intensified for the prisoners by the uncertainty as to their fate and by their being denied access to a professional dream interpreter. The coincidence of the two officials having simultaneous dreams doubtless also heightened their tension.

8. *there is no one* Here in prison.

said to him, “We had dreams, and there is no one to interpret them.” So Joseph said to them, “Surely God can interpret! Tell me [your dreams].”

⁹Then the chief cupbearer told his dream to Joseph. He said to him, “In my dream, there was a vine in front of me. ¹⁰On the vine were three branches. It had barely budded, when out came its blossoms and its clusters ripened into grapes. ¹¹Pharaoh’s cup was in my hand, and I took the grapes, pressed them into Pharaoh’s cup, and placed the cup in Pharaoh’s hand.” ¹²Joseph said to him, “This is its interpretation: The three branches are three days. ¹³In three days Pharaoh will pardon you and restore you to your post; you will place Pharaoh’s cup in his hand, as was your custom formerly when you were his cupbearer. ¹⁴But think of me when all is well with you again, and do me the kindness of mentioning me to Pharaoh, so as to free me from this place. ¹⁵For in truth, I was kidnapped from the land of the Hebrews; nor have I done anything here that they should have put me in the dungeon.”

8 וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו חֲלוֹם חֲלָמְנוּ וּפְתָרֵהוּ אֵינָן אֹתוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם יוֹסֵף הֲלוֹא לֵאלֹהִים פְּתָרָנִים סִפְרוּנָא לִי: 9 וַיִּסְפֹּר שָׂרֵה־הַמְּשָׁקִים אֶת־חֲלָמּוֹ לְיוֹסֵף וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ בְּחֻלְמוֹי וְהִנֵּה־גִפְנֹן לִפְנֵי: 10 וּבְגִפְנֹן שְׁלֹשָׁה שָׂרִיגִם וְהִיא כְּפֹרְחַת עֲלֶיהָ נֹצֵה הַבְּשִׁילֹי אֲשֶׁר־לֶיהָ עֲנָבִים: 11 וְכֹס פְּרָעָה בְּיָדִי וְאָקַח אֶת־הָעֲנָבִים וְאֲשַׁחֵט אֹתָם אֶל־כּוֹס פְּרָעָה וְאָתֶן אֶת־הַכּוֹס עַל־כַּף פְּרָעָה: 12 וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ יוֹסֵף זֶה פְּתָרְנִי שְׁלֹשַׁת הַשָּׂרִיגִים שְׁלֹשַׁת יָמִים הֵם: 13 בְּעוֹדֹ שְׁלֹשַׁת יָמִים יִשָּׂא פְּרָעָה אֶת־רֹאשׁוֹ וְהִשְׁבִּיחַ עַל־כַּנֹּף וְנָתַתְּ כּוֹס־פְּרָעָה בְּיָדוֹ כַּמִּשְׁפֵּט הַרְאֵשׁוֹן אֲשֶׁר הָיְתָה מְשָׁקֶהוּ: 14 כִּי אִם־זָכַרְתִּנִי אֶתְּךָ כֹּאֲשֶׁר יִיטָב לְךָ וְעָשִׂיתָ־נָא עִמָּדִי חֶסֶד וְהִזְכַּרְתִּנִי אֶל־פְּרָעָה וְהוֹצֵאתַנִי מִן־הַבַּיִת הַזֶּה: 15 כִּי־גָבַב גְּבַבְתִּי מֵאֶרֶץ הָעִבְרָיִם וְגַם־פָּה לֹא־עָשִׂיתִי מְאוּמָה כִּי־שָׂמוּ אֹתִי בְּבוֹר: 16 וַיִּרְא

“Surely God can interpret!” Compare 41:16.

Tell me . . . “Perhaps, then, He will reveal the meaning to me,” implies Joseph.

THE CUPBEARER’S DREAM (vv. 9–15)

9–11. The cupbearer seems to find Joseph’s response persuasive, while the baker remains skeptical and hesitant. The dream’s blend of reality and fantasy is recounted in a series of staccato scenes, often without a conjunction between the short clauses. The effect is a telescoping of time in which the grape-growing season, the production process, and the serving of the finished wine each takes place instantaneously, and follow one another in swift succession.

12–13. Joseph deciphers the dream by a scheme of equivalences. The rapidity of the action suggests imminent fulfillment. The recurrence of the number three indicates specifically three days, three branches, three stages of growth, three actions performed; and both “Pharaoh” and his “cup” are mentioned three times. It is quite likely that Joseph actually has knowledge of Pharaoh’s impending birthday celebration, as Bekhor Shor and Ibn Ezra suggest. Moreover, he cannot help noting that in the dream the cupbearer is actually performing his duties in the presence of Pharaoh.

13. *pardon you* Literally, “lift up your head,” that is, you will regain your dignity, honor, and independence. The inability to “raise the head” is synonymous with indignity, shame, and a state of subjection.⁶ In Akkadian, the equivalent idiom *našû rēša* may mean “to summon a delinquent, to call someone into the presence of the king.” This meaning admirably fits the context here and in verses 19 and 20.

14. *this place* Hebrew *bayit*, literally “house”—short for *beit ha-sohar*, “prison,” or “the house of my master” (v. 7; 41:10). The professional diviner and dream interpreter expected to be paid for his services, as is illustrated by the case of Balaam in Numbers 22:17f. Joseph therefore feels free to request a personal favor instead, a tactic that also enhances the credibility of his interpretation.

15. Joseph assures the cupbearer that he would be intervening on behalf of an innocent man.

¹⁶When the chief baker saw how favorably he had interpreted, he said to Joseph, “In my dream, similarly, there were three openwork baskets on my head. ¹⁷In the uppermost basket were all kinds of food for Pharaoh that a baker prepares; and the birds were eating it out of the basket above my head.” ¹⁸Joseph answered, “This is its interpretation: The three baskets are three days. ¹⁹In three days Pharaoh will lift off your head and impale you upon a pole; and the birds will pick off your flesh.”

שֶׁר־הָאֲפִים כִּי טוֹב פָּתַר וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־יוֹסֵף אֶף־
אֲנִי בַחֲלוֹמֵי וְהִנֵּה שְׁלֹשָׁה סִלֵּי חֲרִי עַל־רֹאשִׁי׃
17 וּבִסֵּל הָעֲלִיזִין מִכֹּל מֵאֲכָל פְּרֻעָה מַעֲשֶׂה אִפֶּה
וְהָעוֹף אֲכָל אֹתָם מִן־הַסֵּל מֵעַל רֹאשִׁי׃ 18 וַיַּעַן
יוֹסֵף וַיֹּאמֶר זֶה פְּתִירָנִי שְׁלֹשֶׁת הַסֵּלִים שְׁלֹשֶׁת
יָמִים הֵם׃ 19 בְּעוֹדוֹ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים יִשָּׂא פְרֻעָה
אֶת־רֹאשְׁךָ מֵעֲלִיד וְתִלָּה אוֹתְךָ עַל־עֵץ וְאֲכָל
הָעוֹף אֶת־בְּשָׂרְךָ מֵעֲלִיד׃ 20 מִפְּטִיר׃ וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם

kidnapped The reference would be to the development described in 37:28, 36, in which case it would have been the Midianites, not the brothers, who drew Joseph up from the pit. However, Joseph may simply have used this term because he was ashamed to tell his fellow prisoner that his own brothers had sold him into slavery.

land of the Hebrews That is, the land in which the Hebrews sojourn, either Canaan or the Hebron area in which they were concentrated and were buried. The term is not likely to be an anachronism since the designation was not used in later times. It recalls the description in the Mari documents of the Middle Euphrates region as the “land of Hana,” after the Haneans who wandered and resided there. On “Hebrews,” see Comments to 10:21 and 14:13.

dungeon Hebrew *bor*, literally “pit,” another term for “prison,” deriving from the subterranean nature of the place of detention,⁷ the same term as used in 37:20–29.

THE BAKER’S DREAM (vv. 16–19)

The baker’s skepticism has vanished. He is now eager to talk because he recognizes the points of similarity between his dream and that of the cupbearer. But, all too humanly, he disregards the crucial differences.

16. openwork Hebrew *hori*, a term of uncertain meaning. It has variously been connected with *hor*, “a hole,” and *hvr*, “white,” and explained as describing either the nature of the baskets, “perforated,” “wicker-work,” or their contents, “white bread.” Another interpretation is “cakes baked on glowing coals” or “thick cakes.”⁸

on my head Repeated in verse 17 and of special significance for the interpretation.

17. uppermost basket Only the contents of this one are described because it is the one accessible to the birds.

all kinds . . . The dream here reflects native Egyptian foods. No less than fifty-seven varieties of bread and thirty-eight different types of cake are known from hieroglyphic texts.

birds The baker has neither the strength nor the presence of mind to drive them away⁹—an ominous detail.

18–19. Joseph notes that, unlike the cupbearer, the baker does not prepare the delicacies himself and does not personally serve Pharaoh in his dream. In fact, the food does not even reach Pharaoh, for it is eaten by the birds. This symbolizes the devouring of the baker’s own flesh by the vultures.

19. will lift off your head This looks like a grim play on words (see Comment to v. 13). However, since verse 20 uses a single phrase to indicate the fate of both officials, and since the “removal of the head” is expressed in Hebrew by a different verb (cf. 1 Sam. 17:46), and verse 22 indicates that his punishment was not decapitation but impalement (41:13), many scholars regard the preposition “off” (Heb. *me’-aleikha*) as a dittograph, an unintentional scribal insertion influenced by the last word of the verse. As a matter of fact, the word does not appear in all Hebrew manuscripts or

²⁰On the third day—his birthday—Pharaoh made a banquet for all his officials, and he singled out his chief cupbearer and his chief baker from among his officials. ²¹He restored the chief cupbearer to his cupbearing, and he placed the cup in Pharaoh’s hand; ²²but the chief baker he impaled—just as Joseph had interpreted to them.

²³Yet the chief cupbearer did not think of Joseph; he forgot him.

הַשְּׁלִישִׁי יוֹם הַלֵּלֶת אֶת־פַּרְעֹה וַיַּעַשׂ מִשְׁתֶּה לְכָל־עֲבָדָיו וַיִּשָּׂא אֶת־רֹאשׁוֹ שֵׁר הַמְּשָׁקִים וְאֶת־רֹאשׁ שֵׁר הָאֹפִים בְּתוֹךְ עֲבָדָיו: ²¹ וַיָּשָׁב אֶת־שֵׁר הַמְּשָׁקִים עַל־מִשְׁקָהוּ וַיִּתֵּן הַכּוֹס עַל־כַּף פַּרְעֹה: ²² וְאֶת שֵׁר הָאֹפִים תָּלָה בְּאֶשׁר פָּתַר לָהֶם יוֹסֵף: ²³ וְלֹא־זָכַר שֵׁר־הַמְּשָׁקִים אֶת־יוֹסֵף וַיִּשְׁכַּח: פ

MIKKETS

41 After two years’ time, Pharaoh dreamed that he was standing by the Nile, ²when out of the Nile there came up

מִ"א וַיְהִי מִקֵּץ שְׁנַתִּים יָמִים וּפַרְעֹה חָלַם וַהֲנִה עֹמֵד עַל־הַיָּאֵר: ² וַהֲנִה מִן־הַיָּאֵר עֹלֵת

in the Vulgate translation. It is quite likely that the idiom “to raise the head” (Heb. *n-s-’ ro’sh*) here has the meaning of “call to account” or “bring to justice.”

impale you If we hold to the rendering that the baker is, indeed, to be decapitated, then he cannot also be “hanged.” We must assume that what is meant here is that his corpse is to be publicly exposed after execution by being hung over a spiked pole set in the ground. Impaling, and not hanging, was a widely used mode of execution in the ancient Near East. (Cf. Deut. 21:22f.; Josh. 10:26; 1 Sam. 31:10.)

pick off your flesh The theological beliefs of the Egyptians motivated them to pay special attention to the preservation of the body after death. Hence, the punishment foretold here is particularly loathsome.

FULFILLMENT AND DISAPPOINTMENT (vv. 20–23)

20. singled out Literally, “lifted the head” (see Comments to vv. 13,19).

21.–22. The narration employs the very words of Joseph to indicate the precision with which his predictions were fulfilled.

23. did not think of . . . forgot The combination of negative-positive formulation has led to varying interpretations: He did not recall Joseph, not out of malice but because he forgot—so Bekhor Shor; he remembered him neither at the time he gained his freedom nor subsequently—so Rashi and Rashbam; neither in speech nor mentally did he recall him—so Ibn Ezra. Actually, the wording is purely idiomatic and means complete forgetfulness.¹⁰

The ingratitude of the Egyptian cupbearer prefigures the later national experience of the Israelites in Egypt (cf. Exod. 1:8).

CHAPTER 41

Joseph’s Liberation and Rise to Power (vv. 1–56)

Mikkets

The wheel of fate has turned full circle. Joseph’s misfortunes began with dreams and now end through dreams. Because of their critical role in the subsequent history of Joseph and Israel, Pharaoh’s dreams are narrated immediately and then repeated by Pharaoh himself.

seven cows, handsome and sturdy, and they grazed in the reed grass. ³But presently, seven other cows came up from the Nile close behind them, ugly and gaunt, and stood beside the cows on the bank of the Nile; ⁴and the ugly gaunt cows ate up the seven handsome sturdy cows. And Pharaoh awoke.

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

⁸Next 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.

שֶׁבַע פְּרוֹת יְפוֹת מְרֹאָה וּבְרִיאוֹת בְּשֵׂר וַתִּרְעֶנָּה בְּאָחוּ: ³ וְהִנֵּה שֶׁבַע פְּרוֹת אַחֲרוֹת עֲלוֹת אַחֲרֵיהֶן מִן־הַיָּאֵר רָעוֹת מְרֹאָה וְדַקּוֹת בְּשֵׂר וַתַּעֲמֹדנָה אֶצְל הַפְּרוֹת עַל־שֵׁפֶת הַיָּאֵר: ⁴ וַתֹּאכְלֶנָּה הַפְּרוֹת רָעוֹת הַמְרֹאָה וְדַקּוֹת הַבְּשֵׂר אֶת שֶׁבַע הַפְּרוֹת יְפוֹת הַמְרֹאָה וְהַבְּרִיאוֹת וַיִּיקֶץ פְּרָעֹה: ⁵ וַיִּישָׁן וַיִּחְלֹם שֵׁנִית וְהִנֵּה שֶׁבַע שִׁבְלִים עֲלוֹת בְּקִנָּה אַחַד בְּרִיאוֹת וְטֹבוֹת: ⁶ וְהִנֵּה שֶׁבַע שִׁבְלִים דַּקּוֹת וַיִּשְׂדוּפֹת קָרִים צִמְחוֹת אַחֲרֵיהֶן: ⁷ וַתִּבְלַעְנָה הַשִּׁבְלִים הַדַּקּוֹת אֶת שֶׁבַע הַשִּׁבְלִים הַבְּרִיאוֹת וְהַמְלֵאוֹת וַיִּיקֶץ פְּרָעֹה וְהִנֵּה חֲלוֹם: ⁸ וַיְהִי בַּבֹּקֶר וַתַּפְּעֵם רוּחוֹ וַיִּשְׁלַח וַיִּקְרָא אֶת־כְּלֵי־חֲרָטְמֵי מִצְרַיִם וְאֶת־כְּלֵי־חֲכָמֵיהֶם וַיִּסְפֹּר פְּרָעֹה לָהֶם אֶת־חֲלֹמוֹ וְאִין־פֹּתֵר אֹתָם לְפְרָעֹה:

PHARAOH'S DREAMS (vv. 1–8)

1. *After two years' time* Literally, “at the end of two years of days”; that is, two complete years have elapsed since the release of the cupbearer. Possibly the dreams and the events connected with them also took place on Pharaoh’s birthday, as suggested by Shadal.

the Nile Hebrew *ye’or*, an Egyptian loan word also found as *ya-ru-’u* in Assyrian.¹ The Nile as the setting for Pharaoh’s dream is fateful, for the river was literally the lifeline of Egypt, the source of its entire economy.

2. *seven cows* This is a touch of local color, for cows were abundant in Egypt and important to the economy. The motif of seven cows is a familiar one from Egyptian paintings and texts.

reed grass Hebrew *’ahu*, from an Egyptian loan word that originally meant the land flooded by the Nile and then came to be used for pastureland in general. From Egyptian it passed into Hebrew and other Semitic languages.²

3. *close behind them* That is, in time.

5. *grew* Hebrew *’olot*, the same word as in verses 2f. for the “coming up” of the cows.

on a single stalk A clear symbol of abundance.

6. *scorched by the east wind* This is usually taken to refer to the hot, dry, withering wind known as the *hamsin*, or sirocco, which is frequently used in the Bible as a symbol of destruction.³ Here, however, as in Exodus 10:13 and 14:21, Hebrew *kadim* may signify the south wind that blows in from the Sahara since Egypt was oriented southward to the source and headwaters of the Nile.

7. *it was a dream* Much to Pharaoh’s surprise, for it all seemed so vivid and real. It should be noted that this phrase is not found in verse 4 after the first dream and that the singular “dream” is used in verses 8, 15, and 25, although the reference is to both dreams. The text hints at the underlying identical nature of the interpretations (cf. Comment to v. 22).

8. *Next morning . . . agitated* Implying that, following his dreams, Pharaoh spent a sleepless night, anxiously awaiting the dawn.

⁹The chief cupbearer then spoke up and said to Pharaoh, “I must make mention today of my offenses. ¹⁰Once Pharaoh was angry with his servants, and placed me in custody in the house of the chief steward, together with the chief baker. ¹¹We had dreams the same night, he and I, each of us a dream with a meaning of its own. ¹²A 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. ¹³And as he interpreted for us, so it came to pass: I was restored to my post, and the other was impaled.”

9 וַיִּדְבֹר שֶׁר הַמְשָׁקִים אֶת־פְּרָעָה לֵאמֹר אֶת־
 חַטָּאֵי אֲנִי מִזְכִּיר הַיּוֹם: ¹⁰ פְּרָעָה קִצַּף עַל־עַבְדָּיו
 וַיִּתֵּן אֹתִי בַּמְשָׁמֵר בֵּית שֶׁר הַטְּבָחִים אִתִּי וְאֶת
 שֶׁר הָאֲפִים: ¹¹ וַנְּחַלְמֵה חֶלֶום בְּלַיְלָה אֶחָד אֲנִי
 וְהוּא אִישׁ כְּפַתְרוֹן חִלְמוֹ חִלְמָנוּ: ¹² וְשֵׁם אֶתְנֵנוּ
 גַּעַר עַבְדִּי עֶבֶד לְשֶׁר הַטְּבָחִים וַנְּסַפְּרֵלּוּ
 וַיִּפְתַּר־לָנוּ אֶת־חִלְמֹתֵינוּ אִישׁ כְּחִלְמוֹ פָּתַר:
¹³ וַיְהִי כַּאֲשֶׁר פָּתַר־לָנוּ כֵּן הָיָה אִתִּי הַשִּׁיב עַל־
 כַּנִּי וְאֶתּוֹ תָּלָה: ¹⁴ וַיִּשְׁלַח פְּרָעָה וַיִּקְרָא אֶת־

magicians Hebrew *hartumim*, probably an Egyptian loan word. It appears in the Bible only in connection with Egypt and Babylon.⁴ Magic was a feature of Egyptian life. It should be noted that although Israel shared with its pagan neighbors a belief in the reality of dreams as a medium of divine communication, it never developed, as did Egypt and Mesopotamia, a class of magicians; quite the contrary, the religion of Israel banished magic and sorcery from its midst (cf. Lev. 19:26; Deut. 18:10f.).

wise men Hebrew *hakhamim*, the first use of the stem *h-k-m* in the Bible. Here the term refers to those who possessed a fund of specialized, utilitarian knowledge and skill in the magic arts.

his dreams Literally, “his dream,” in the singular. See Comment to verse 7.

none could interpret them for Pharaoh It is inconceivable that the professional dream interpreters are unable to provide “interpretations.” The key phrase, therefore, is “for Pharaoh,” that is, their solutions do not satisfy him.⁵ The fact is that there is nothing in the dreams that relates in a personal way to Pharaoh himself. This, incidentally, is in contrast to all previous dreams in Genesis in which the dreamer plays a central role. It is therefore clear to Pharaoh that his dream experience has a wider, national significance. The customary fawning and flattering expositions of the magicians are therefore unconvincing.

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 rivalry between Daniel and the magicians of Babylon in Daniel 2 and 4, and in the story of Balaam in Numbers 22–23.

THE CUPBEARER REMEMBERS JOSEPH (vv. 9–13)

9. *I must make mention* Hebrew *mazkir*, the same stem as used by Joseph in his plea in 40:14 and by the Narrator in reporting the ingratitude of the cupbearer in 40:23. The similarity of language conveys a direct relationship between the events. Hence, he speaks of his “offenses” in the plural, that is, against Pharaoh and against Joseph.

10. Compare 40:1–3.

11. *with a meaning of its own* Compare 40:5.

12. *A Hebrew youth . . . a servant* Rabbinic tradition understood this description as being deliberately derogatory, as though the cupbearer paid his debt to Joseph only reluctantly.⁶ While there is nothing in the text itself to suggest other than a simple factual statement, it is to be noted that the cupbearer actually stops short of recommending that Joseph be brought to Pharaoh.

¹⁴Thereupon 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. ¹⁵And 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.” ¹⁶Joseph answered Pharaoh, saying, “Not I! God will see to Pharaoh’s welfare.”

¹⁷Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “In my dream, I was standing on the bank of the Nile, ¹⁸when out of the Nile came up seven sturdy and well-formed cows and grazed in the reed grass. ¹⁹Presently there followed them seven other cows, scrawny, ill-formed, and emaciated—never had I seen their likes for ugliness in all the land of Egypt! ²⁰And the seven lean and ugly cows ate up the first seven cows, the sturdy ones; ²¹but when they had consumed them, one could not tell that they had consumed them, for they looked just as bad as before. And I awoke. ²²In my other dream, I saw seven ears of grain, full and healthy, growing

יוסף וירצהו מן־הבור ויגלה ויחלף שמלתיו ויבא אל־פרעה: שני ¹⁵ ויאמר פרעה אל־יוסף חלום חלמתי ופתר אין אתו ואני שמעתי עליך לאמר תשמע חלום לפתר אתו: ¹⁶ ויען יוסף את־פרעה לאמר בלעדי אלהים יענה את־שלום פרעה: [שני לספרדים] ¹⁷ ויברך פרעה אל־יוסף בחלמי הנני עמד על־שפת היאר: ¹⁸ והנה מן־היאר עלת שבע פרות בריאות בשר ויפת תאר ותדעינה באחיו: ¹⁹ והנה שבע־פרות אחרות עלות אחריהן הליות ורעות תאר מאד ורקות בשר לא־ראיתי כהנה בכל־ארץ מצרים לרע: ²⁰ ותאכלנה הפרות הרקות והרעות את שבע הפרות הראשונות הבריאות: ²¹ ותבאנה אל־קרבה ולא נודע כי־באו אל־קרבה ומראיהן רע באשר בתחלה ואיקץ: ²² וארא בחלמי והנה שבע

JOSEPH’S DREAM INTERPRETATION (vv. 14–32)

14. The six verbs indicate a series of actions performed in swift succession in the atmosphere of urgency and stress that is created when Pharaoh’s wishes are to be satisfied.

dungeon Hebrew *bor*. See Comment to 40:15. The term forges a connection with 37:20–29, for Joseph’s misery began in a *bor* (“pit”) and ends when he is brought out of a *bor* (“dungeon”).

his hair cut The Hebrew verb *g-l-h*, “to shave,” applies both to the head, as in Numbers 6:9, and to the face, as in Jeremiah 41:5. For hygienic reasons, Egyptian men generally shaved both areas.

his clothes Clothing has been a constant factor in Joseph’s misfortunes.⁷ This change of clothing has symbolic meaning as the process of his liberation now begins.

15. no one can interpret See Comment to verse 8.

you . . . Pharaoh believes Joseph is endowed with innate magical power.

16. God will see to . . . The precise meaning of Hebrew *ya’aneh shalom* is unclear. If it is connected with the phrase *sha’al shalom* (Pss. 122:6), “to pray for the welfare of,” then it implies, “God will respond [to me and grant] Pharaoh’s welfare.” It is not that Joseph knows the interpretation of the dreams in advance; rather, he is convinced that the sudden turn of events that has brought him from the dungeon into the presence of Pharaoh is providential for him. And he believes that he will receive a dream interpretation from God that will entirely satisfy Pharaoh.

17.–24. The recitation of the dreams to Joseph contains a number of expansions of and verbal variations from the original narration. This literary device is a recurring feature of repetitions in biblical discourse.

19. never had I seen . . . This previously unstated personal observation points to the real meaning of the dream.

21. This entire verse is not in the original narrative. Here, again, it directs attention to the key element (cf. v. 30f.).

22. In my . . . dream Significantly, the phrase (v. 5) “a second time” is omitted, as though Pharaoh himself realizes that the two dreams are really one (cf. Comment to v. 7).

on a single stalk; ²³but right behind them sprouted seven ears, shriveled, thin, and scorched by the east wind. ²⁴And the thin ears swallowed the seven healthy ears. I have told my magicians, but none has an explanation for me.”

²⁵And Joseph said to Pharaoh, “Pharaoh’s dreams are one and the same: God has told Pharaoh what He is about to do. ²⁶The seven healthy cows are seven years, and the seven healthy ears are seven years; it is the same dream. ²⁷The 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. ²⁸It is just as I have told Pharaoh: God has revealed to Pharaoh what He is about to do. ²⁹Immediately ahead are seven years of great abundance in all the land of Egypt. ³⁰After 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, ³¹no trace of the abundance will be left in the land because of the famine thereafter, for it will be very severe. ³²As 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.

שְׁבִלִים עֲלִית בְּקִנְיָה אֶחָד מֵלֵאֵת וְטֹבוֹת: ²³ וְהִנֵּה שֶׁבַע שְׁבִלִים צְנֻמוֹת דַּקּוֹת שְׂדֵפוֹת קָדִים צְמֻחוֹת אַחֲרֵיהֶם: ²⁴ וְתִבְלַעַן הַשְּׁבִלִים הַדַּקּוֹת אֶת שֶׁבַע הַשְּׁבִלִים הַטּוֹבוֹת וְאָמַר אֶל־הַחֲרֻטְמִים וְאִין מַגִּיד לִי: ²⁵ וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף אֶל־פַּרְעֹה חֲלוֹם פַּרְעֹה אֶחָד הוּא אֵת אֲשֶׁר הָאֱלֹהִים עָשָׂה הַגִּיד לְפַרְעֹה: ²⁶ שֶׁבַע פָּרֹת הַטֹּבוֹת שֶׁבַע שָׁנִים הֵנָּה וְשֶׁבַע הַשְּׁבִלִים הַטֹּבוֹת שֶׁבַע שָׁנִים הֵנָּה חֲלוֹם אֶחָד הוּא: ²⁷ וְשֶׁבַע הַפָּרוֹת הַרָקוֹת וְהָרַעֲת הָעֲלִית אַחֲרֵיהֶן שֶׁבַע שָׁנִים הֵנָּה וְשֶׁבַע הַשְּׁבִלִים הַרָקוֹת שְׂדֵפוֹת הַקָּדִים יִהְיוּ שֶׁבַע שָׁנֵי רָעָב: ²⁸ הוּא הַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתִּי אֶל־פַּרְעֹה אֲשֶׁר הָאֱלֹהִים עָשָׂה הָרְאָה אֶת־פַּרְעֹה: ²⁹ הֵנָּה שֶׁבַע שָׁנִים בָּאוֹת שֶׁבַע גְּדוֹל בְּכָל־אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם: ³⁰ וְקָמוּ שֶׁבַע שָׁנֵי רָעָב אַחֲרֵיהֶן וְנִשְׁפַח כָּל־הַשֶּׁבַע בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם וְכֻלָּה הָרָעָב אֶת־הָאֶרֶץ: ³¹ וְלֹא־יִוָּרַע הַשֶּׁבַע בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם הָרָעָב הַהוּא אַחֲרֵי־כֵן כִּי־כָבֵד הוּא מֵאָדָּם: ³² וְעַל הַשָּׁנוֹת הַחֲלוֹם אֶל־פַּרְעֹה פְּעָמִים כִּי־נִכּוֹן הַדָּבָר מֵעַם

24. none has an explanation Hebrew *maggid*, literally “told,” a verb often used in connection with elucidation of what had been obscure.⁸ The phrase refers to what was related in verses 8 and 15.

25. one and the same Both dreams, although separate and successive, form part of a single whole and give expression to the identical phenomenon.

has told Hebrew *higgid*, that is, “has disclosed” (see vv. 24, 28).

27. famine Pharaoh elaborated upon the negative aspects of his dreams (vv. 19,21) emphasizing the elements that had deeply disturbed him. Joseph, therefore, mentions the famine first, inverting the order of the dream phenomena. In this way, the narrative indicates that it is the famine that causes Joseph’s emancipation and elevation to high office and brings his brothers down to Egypt. It is these events that are the ultimate points of interest in the story.⁹

28. just as I have told Compare verses 16 and 25.

revealed Hebrew *her’ah* expresses the language of vision—that is, of visual imagery—as distinct from verbal articulation.

31. no trace Hebrew *ve-lo’ yivvada’*, literally “it will not be known,” echoes and interprets verse 21 (cf. *ve-lo’ noda’*). The reserves of food set aside for the famine will be completely used up.

32. the same dream twice See Comment to 37:9.

determined Hebrew *nakhon*, a word borrowed from Israelite legal terminology, meaning it is established beyond the shadow of a doubt.¹⁰

soon The seven-year cycle begins at once.

JOSEPH’S ADVICE (vv. 33–36)

Emboldened, perhaps by some silent gesture of satisfaction on the part of Pharaoh, and desirous of imparting a sense of urgency, Joseph seizes the opportunity to offer unsolicited advice, the tenor of which is concern for the welfare of the people. He suggests that three measures be taken to avert the

³³“Accordingly, let Pharaoh find a man of discernment and wisdom, and set him over the land of Egypt. ³⁴And let Pharaoh take steps to appoint overseers over the land, and organize the land of Egypt in the seven years of plenty. ³⁵Let 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. ³⁶Let 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.”

³⁷The plan pleased Pharaoh and all his courtiers. ³⁸And Pharaoh said to his courtiers, “Could we find another like him, a man in whom is the spirit of God?” ³⁹So Pharaoh

הָאֱלֹהִים וּמִמֶּהָר הָאֱלֹהִים לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ: ³³ וְעַתָּה יִרְא פְרַעֲהַ אִישׁ נָכוֹן וְחָכָם וְיִשְׁיִתְהוּ עַל-אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם: ³⁴ יַעֲשֶׂה פְרַעֲהַ וַיִּפְקֵד וַיִּפְקְדִים עַל-הָאָרֶץ וְחִמְשׁ אֶת-אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בְּשִׁבְעַת שָׁנֵי הַשְּׁבַע: ³⁵ וַיִּקְבְּצוּ אֶת-כָּל-אֹכֶל הַשָּׁנִים הַטּוֹבוֹת הַבָּאֹת הָאֵלֶּה וַיִּצְבְּרוּ-בָרָתָהּ תַּחַת יַד-פְּרַעֲהַ אֹכֶל בְּעָרִים וְשָׁמְרוּ: ³⁶ וְהָיָה הָאֹכֶל לַפְּקֻדוֹן לְאֶרֶץ לְשִׁבְעַת שָׁנֵי הַרְעָב אֲשֶׁר תִּהְיֶינָה בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וְלֹא-תִכָּרֵת הָאֶרֶץ בְּרָעָב: ³⁷ וַיִּיטֵב הַדָּבָר בְּעֵינֵי פְרַעֲהַ וּבְעֵינֵי כָל-עַבְדָּיו: ³⁸ וַיֹּאמֶר פְּרַעֲהַ אֶל-עַבְדָּיו הֲנִמְצָא כֹּה־אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים בּוֹ: ³⁹ שְׁלִישִׁי וַיֹּאמֶר

dreaded menace of famine: the selection of a national commissioner, the appointment of regional overseers, and the institution of urban grain storage.

33. Accordingly Hebrew *ve-’atah* frequently introduces a new episode or development.¹¹ Joseph presents his advice not as part of the dream message but as a personal suggestion.

34. let Pharaoh Joseph is extremely tactful and cautious. He does not wish to raise any suspicion that he is suggesting the creation of a new, and possibly threatening, focus of ruling power. The repeated emphasis on “Pharaoh,” in fact, accords with the ancient Egyptian concept of government, which stressed the ubiquitous, omniscient, and omnipotent nature of the king.

take steps Hebrew *ya’aseh*. Joseph deliberately uses the same verbal stem he has used three times before in connection with the impending divine action (vv. 25,28,32), as though to imply that Pharaoh is the human counterpart of God.

and organize Hebrew *himmesh*. This rendering connects the word with *hamush*, “armed, equipped, prepared.” An alternative interpretation understands it to be derived from *hamesh*, “five”; that is, the populace is to give a fifth part of the produce to the crown for storage purposes. Support for this view may be found in the analogous *shillesh*, “to divide into three”; *shishsheh*, “to set aside a sixth part”; *isser*, “to give/take a tithe.” It is to be noted that Joseph later institutes a permanent tax of one-fifth on all produce (47:24,26) and that the number “five” recurs many times in the Joseph story.¹²

35. Joseph sensibly suggests the stockpiling of grain in the plentiful years against the forthcoming years of famine.

JOSEPH’S APPOINTMENT AS VIZIER (vv. 37–46)

37. Pharaoh and his courtiers recognize at once that Joseph’s interpretation of the dreams is correct and his advice sound. They are impressed by his perception that the two dreams are actually one, by his relating them to national affairs rather than to the king’s personal interests, and by the social concern that he displays in his advice. Not content just to predict disaster, Joseph immediately suggests measures to alleviate the lot of the Egyptian people.

38. Could we find Pharaoh’s question to his courtiers is rhetorical. He knows at once what he must do. Although they had shown their pleasure at Joseph’s interpretation and advice, the courtiers now make no comment. Perhaps they expected the new appointee to be one of themselves and are disappointed.

in whom is the spirit of God This is the first biblical mention of one so endowed. In Exodus 31:3 and 35:31, Bezalel is described as another who is endowed with God’s spirit and therefore has “skill, ability and knowledge.” Belshazzar similarly describes Daniel: “I have heard about you that

said to Joseph, “Since God has made all this known to you, there is none so discerning and wise as you. ⁴⁰You shall be in charge of my court, and by your command shall all my people be directed; only with respect to the throne shall I be superior to you.” ⁴¹Pharaoh further said to Joseph, “See, I put you in charge of all the land of Egypt.” ⁴²And 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 gold chain about his neck. ⁴³He had him ride in the

פֶּרְעָה אֶל-יוֹסֵף אֶחָדִי הוֹדִיעַ אֱלֹהִים אוֹתָךְ אֶת-
כָּל-זֹאת אֵיךְ-נִבְּוֶן וְחָכְמָם כְּמוֹךְ: ⁴⁰ אִתָּה תִּהְיֶה
עַל-בֵּיתִי וְעַל-פִּיךָ יִשָּׁק כָּל-עַמִּי רַק הַכִּסֵּא אֲגַדֵּל
מִמֶּנּוּ: ⁴¹ וַיֹּאמֶר פֶּרְעָה אֶל-יוֹסֵף רֵאֵה נִתַּנִּי אֶתְךָ
עַל כָּל-אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם: ⁴² וַיִּסֶר פֶּרְעָה אֶת-טַבַּעְתּוֹ
מֵעַל יָדוֹ וַיִּתֵּן אֹתָהּ עַל-יַד יוֹסֵף וַיִּלְבַּשׂ אֹתוֹ
בְּגָדֵי-שֵׁשׁ וַיַּשֶּׂם רֶבֶד הַזָּהָב עַל-צוּאָרוֹ: ⁴³ וַיַּרְבֵּב

you have the spirit of the gods in you, and that illumination, knowledge, and extraordinary wisdom are to be found in you” (Dan. 5:14). Generally, possession of the “spirit of God” impels one to undertake a mission (Num. 27:18), imparts extraordinary energy and drive (Judg. 3:10; 11:29), and produces uncommon intelligence and practical wisdom.

39. discerning and wise Pharaoh repeats Joseph’s own words (v. 33).

40. in charge of my court This function probably refers to the position of “Overseer of the Domain of the Palace,” one of the known Egyptian bureaucratic titles. Most likely, Joseph is given control over the king’s personal estates. A similar title was later employed in the kingdoms of Judah and Israel.¹³

by your command . . . directed Hebrew *ve-‘al pikha yishshak kol ‘ammi* may be rendered literally, “on your mouth shall all my people kiss,” perhaps a figurative expression for paying homage. However, none of the ancient versions understood it in this way. The first two words undoubtedly mean “by your order,” as in Genesis 45:21 and Exodus 17:1. *Yishshak* has been connected with *n-sh-k*, “to be armed, equipped,” that is, “provisioned.”¹⁴ The context requires a meaning “conduct themselves, be directed.”

41. Pharaoh further said In contrast to his previous loquacity, Joseph does not utter a word in response to Pharaoh’s announcement. The threefold repetition of the phrase “Pharaoh said to Joseph,” in verses 39, 41, and 44, probably indicates that the king pauses after each statement to ascertain the young man’s reaction and then reiterates his decision in order to reassure the dumbstruck Joseph that he really means what he says.

in charge of all the land The function reflects the Egyptian title “Chief of the Entire Land.”

42. Pharaoh now performs a series of ceremonial acts that, in effect, constitute Joseph’s investiture as “Grand Vizier of Egypt.”

signet ring Hebrew *tabba‘at* derives from Egyptian *ḡbʿt*, attested in Egyptian Old Kingdom texts (29th–23rd cent. B.C.E.). The transfer of the ring bearing the royal seal from the finger of Pharaoh to that of Joseph signifies the delegation of authority; it enables the new official to validate documents in the king’s name.¹⁵ The title “Royal Seal-Bearer” was well known in the Egyptian bureaucracy.

fine linen Hebrew *shesh* is a loan word from Egyptian *šš*, “byssus,” used for cloth of exceptional quality. The same material was used in Israel for the Tabernacle furnishings and the priestly vestments. In later Hebrew, *shesh* was replaced by *buts*, the term current in the Mesopotamian-Syrian area.

Joseph’s new robes bring to mind the passage in the autobiography of Rekh-mi-Re, vizier of Upper Egypt in the days of Thutmose III (15th cent. B.C.E.), where he describes how he “went forth . . . clad in fine linen.”¹⁶

a gold chain This, too, is a well-known Egyptian symbol; the giving of a gold chain was one of the highest distinctions the king could bestow upon his favorites. The three items mentioned here in the investiture ceremony, as well as the one in verse 43, all appear in the report of the seventh-century B.C.E. Assyrian conqueror Ashurbanipal concerning his campaign against Egypt. Describing

chariot of his second-in-command, and they cried before him, “Abrek!” Thus he placed him over all the land of Egypt.

⁴⁴Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I am Pharaoh; yet without you, no one shall lift up hand or foot in all the land of Egypt.” ⁴⁵Pharaoh then gave Joseph the name Zaphenath-paneah; and he gave him for a wife Asenath daughter of Poti-phera, priest of On. Thus Joseph emerged in charge of

אֹתוֹ בְּמִרְכָּבַת הַמִּשְׁנָה אֲשֶׁר-לוֹ וַיִּקְרְאוּ לְפָנָיו
 אֲבֵרֶךְ וְנָתַן אֹתוֹ עַל כָּל-אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם: 44 וַיֹּאמֶר
 פְּרֹעֶה אֶל-יוֹסֵף אֲנִי פְרֹעֶה וּבְלֹעֲדֶיךָ לֹא-יָרִים
 אִישׁ אֶת-יָדוֹ וְאֶת-רַגְלוֹ בְּכָל-אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:
 45 וַיִּקְרָא פְרֹעֶה שְׁם-יוֹסֵף צְפֹנְתַן פַּעֲנָח וַיִּתֵּן-לוֹ
 אֶת-אֲסֵנַת בַּת-פְּוֹטִי פְרַע בְּהֵן אֵן לְאִשָּׁה וַיֵּצֵא

his installation of Necho as pharaoh, which was performed according to Egyptian custom, Ashurbanipal says that he clad Necho in a garment with multicolored trimmings, placed a golden chain around his neck, put golden rings on his hands, and presented him with chariots.

43. chariot This is the first reference to a chariot in the Bible. The horse is not mentioned here, but there is little doubt that the horse-drawn chariot is intended, for the ass was not used in Egypt as a draft animal. The Hyksos invasion of Egypt in the eighteenth century B.C.E. first introduced the chariot to that country as an instrument of warfare. The narrative here implies the use of the chariot as a status symbol, as in 2 Samuel 15:1.

second-in-command This meaning of Hebrew *mishneh* is established by such texts as 1 Samuel 23:17, 2 Kings 23:4 and 2 Chronicles 28:7; it is so understood by Rashbam, Radak, and Ramban. It would thus be a title corresponding to the Akkadian *terdennu* (= *tartan*, Isa. 20:1) and equivalent to viceroy. The ancient versions, such as the Septuagint, Vulgate, and Targums, applied *mishneh* to the chariot and took it to mean “his second one,” in accordance with the use of *mishneh* as “double” in Genesis 43:12 and Exodus 16:22 and “copy” in Deuteronomy 17:18 and Joshua 8:32. A similar phrase in 2 Chronicles 35:24, *rekhev ha-mishneh*, is itself ambiguous in its context.

they cried before him The practice of having heralds declaim in front of the chariot rider is recorded in Esther 6:9. It seems to have been customary to have runners preceding the chariot of a dignitary in the early days of the Israelite monarchy, as is evidenced by 2 Samuel 15:1 and 1 Kings 1:5.

Abrek! An exclamation found nowhere else. Its meaning was already lost by rabbinic times. A fanciful interpretation, *ab rek* (= rex), “father of the king” (cf. Gen. 45:8), is found in the Targums (cf. BB 4a) and is reflected in the Peshitta, “father and ruler.” Medieval Jewish commentators took the term to be a verb formed from the noun *berekh*, “knee,” meaning “bend the knee!”¹⁷ In Akkadian, *abarakku* is the term for a steward of the temple and the chief steward of a private or royal household. The word may well be Egyptian, and *’b-r.k*, meaning “attention!”, has been suggested.

44. I am Pharaoh That is, I speak with the full authority of my royal office. See Comment to 15:7.

lift up hand or foot A figure of speech meaning “no action shall be taken.”

45. The change of name signifies a new identity and a fresh start in life. See Comment to 17:5. In the case of Joseph, additional factors are involved. The king may have wanted to “Egyptianize” Joseph. An analogy exists in the case of another foreigner, Ben Ozen, who rose to high office at the court of Merneptah (ca. 1224–1214 B.C.E.) and was given two Egyptian names by his royal master. The general tendency of foreigners to acculturate in Egypt is well documented. Hyksos rulers adopted Egyptian names, and an eighteenth-century B.C.E. inventory of servants on an estate (see Comment to 39:2) shows that most of the children of the Asians bore local names.

The changing of Joseph’s name is also connected with the key role that his elevation plays within the larger story. For the prophecy of Genesis 15:13f. to be fulfilled and the Exodus accomplished, the Israelites must settle in Egypt. The descent of Joseph’s brothers is the indispensable means to this end, and the external Egyptianization of Joseph is pivotal, for his brothers must not recognize him.

Zaphenath-paneah Traditional exegesis connects the name with Joseph’s penchant for interpreting dreams, seeing in the first element a derivation from the Hebrew stem *ts-f-n*, “to hide,” and rendering the second, contextually, “elucidate.” The name would thus mean “revealer of hidden

the land of Egypt.—⁴⁶Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh king of Egypt.—Leaving Pharaoh’s presence, Joseph traveled through all the land of Egypt.

⁴⁷During the seven years of plenty, the land produced in abundance. ⁴⁸And he gathered all the grain of the seven years that the land of Egypt was enjoying, and stored the grain in the cities; he put in each city the grain of the fields

יוסף על־אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם: 46 וְיוֹסֵף בֶּן־שְׁלֹשִׁים שָׁנָה
בְּעֵמְדוֹ לִפְנֵי פַרְעֹה מִלֶּדֶת־מִצְרַיִם וַיֵּצֵא יוֹסֵף
מִלִּפְנֵי פַרְעֹה וַיַּעֲבֹר בְּכָל־אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם: 47 וַתַּעֲשׂ
הָאֶרֶץ בְּשִׁבַע שָׁנֵי הַשְּׁבַע לְקַמְצִים: 48 וַיִּקְבֹּץ
אֶת־כָּל־אֲכָלוֹ שְׁבַע שָׁנִים אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ בְּאֶרֶץ
מִצְרַיִם וַיִּתֵּן־אֲכָל בְּעָרִים אֲכָל שְׂדֵה־הָעִיר אֲשֶׁר

things.”¹⁸ However, an Egyptian origin is evident, and a widely held view regards it as the transcription of *dd-p',-ntr-'iw.f-'nh*, “God speaks; he lives.” The Septuagint transcribed it *psonthomphanech*, which seems to represent the Late Egyptian word *psontenpa'anh*, which means, “the creator /sustainer of life.” This latter interpretation has the advantage of being appropriate to Joseph’s mission as vizier.

Asenath The form of the name is Hebraic.¹⁹ Its origin is Egyptian *'Iw.s-(n)-Nt*, meaning “she who belongs to (the goddess) Neith.”

Poti-phaera For this name, see Comment to 37:36.

priest of On This city, situated 7 miles northeast of modern Cairo, was the great cultic center of the sun-god Re, called Bet Shemesh in Hebrew (Jer. 43:13) and Heliopolis in Greek. *On* is derived from Egyptian *iwnnw*, which means “a column.” The name reflects the city’s most outstanding architectural features, which were columns and colonnades. The high priest at On²⁰ held the exalted title “Greatest of Seers.” Joseph thus marries into the elite of Egyptian nobility.

emerged in charge of Literally, “went out over.” The precise meaning of the Hebrew is unclear. The present rendering is supported by the force of the preposition *'al* in verses 40, 41, and 43, and was so understood by the Targums and by Saadiah. The clause should probably be understood as short for “he left Pharaoh’s presence to be in charge of the land of Egypt.”

46. Joseph . . . king of Egypt This parenthetical note, giving Joseph’s age as thirty at the time his sufferings finally ended, corresponds to the recording of his age as seventeen when they began (37:2). This provides a chronological framework for the narrative.

entered the service of This is the force of the Hebrew expression *'amad lifnei*, literally “stood before.”²¹

traveled . . . Egypt Joseph loses no time in familiarizing himself with local conditions preparatory to his main task of enabling the Egyptians to survive the expected famine.

The elevation of Joseph by the king raises the question of whether a foreigner could really have risen to such high office in the Egyptian government. The cases of the Semitic nomad Yanḥamu, who became Egyptian commissioner for Canaan and Syria in the days of Akhnaton (ca. 1370–1353 B.C.E.), and of Ben Ozen, who came from a place situated east of Lake Tiberias and rose to become the royal herald, or marshal, at the court of Merneptah (ca. 1224–1214 B.C.E.) indicate that such elevation of foreigners was indeed possible. In fact, a brother of the same Merneptah was given in marriage by his father Ramses II (ca. 1290–1224 B.C.E.) to the daughter of a Syrian sea captain named Ben-Anath. Thus 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 of Egypt.

THE SEVEN YEARS OF PLENTY (vv. 47–49)

47. in abundance Hebrew *li-kematsim*. The singular *komets* means “a handful” (Lev. 2:2). It is assumed that “by handfuls” means “bumper crops.” Another tradition takes the *kematsim* to mean “storage pits for grain.”²²

48–49. From Joseph’s activities it is clear that he holds the well-known Egyptian office of “Overseer of the Granaries of Upper and Lower Egypt,” whose duties were responsibility for the

around it. ⁴⁹So 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.

⁵⁰Before the years of famine came, Joseph became the father of two sons, whom Asenath daughter of Poti-phaera, priest of On, bore to him. ⁵¹Joseph named the first-born Manasseh, meaning, “God has made me forget completely my hardship and my parental home.” ⁵²And the second he named Ephraim, meaning, “God has made me fertile in the land of my affliction.”

סביבתיָה נָתַן בְּתוֹכָהּ: 49 וַיִּצְבֹּר יוֹסֵף בָּר כְּחֹל הַיָּם הַרְבֵּה מְאֹד עַד כִּי־חָדַל לִסְפֹּר כִּי־אֵין מִסְפָּר: 50 וּלְיוֹסֵף יָלְדוּ שְׁנֵי בָנִים בְּטָרַם תְּבוֹא שְׁנַת הָרָעָב אֲשֶׁר יִלְדֶה־לוֹ אֲסֵנַת בַּת־פְּוֹטִי פְרַע כְּהֵן אֹן: 51 וַיִּקְרָא יוֹסֵף אֶת־שֵׁם הַבְּכוֹר מְנַשֶּׁה כִּי־נָשַׁן אֱלֹהִים אֶת־כָּל־עַמְלִי וְאֵת כָּל־בֵּית אָבִי: 52 וְאֵת שֵׁם הַשֵּׁנִי קָרָא אֶפְרַיִם כִּי־הִפְרִנִי אֱלֹהִים בְּאֶרֶץ עַנְיִי: רביעי 53 וַתִּכְלֶינָה שְׁבַע

collection of tax payments on field produce (cf. Gen. 47:24), the storage of an adequate supply of food in years of plenty, and the distribution of food during years of famine.

It was a strange quirk of fate that the shepherd boy should have become, in effect, “Minister of Agriculture.” Joseph’s first dream, described in Genesis 37:7, perhaps contained a hint of his future vocation.

JOSEPH’S TWO SONS (vv. 50–52)

50. years Literally, “year of famine.” The use of the singular may imply that the sons were born either before the first year of the famine or before the year when its effect first becomes severe—that is, toward the end of the second year of famine, when the migration of Jacob and his family took place. The information is inserted here in order to anticipate and explain the incident in 48:5f.

became the father of The use of the singular form of the Hebrew verb *yullad* here and in 46:27 may indicate that the boys were twins, but the same use is found in 35:26, which defies such an explanation.

whom Asenath . . . bore Joseph seems to have remained monogamous.

51. Manasseh The primary meaning of the name is “he who causes to forget.” Such a name would most likely be given to a child born after some misfortune, such as the death of an earlier child or of the father. Joseph here adapts the name to his own situation.²³

meaning Hebrew *ki*, “because.” See Comment to 4:25.

my hardship and my parental home Since the second son is named in reference to Joseph’s sufferings in Egypt (v. 52), this must refer wholly to his previous experiences in Canaan. Hence, it is best, with Saadiah and Ibn Janah, to take the clauses as an instance of hendiadys, a single idea being expressed by two terms. The combination, in effect, means “my suffering in my parental home.”

With the birth of an heir, Joseph now has founded his own nuclear family. He has achieved physical, social, and psychological security and feels he can forget his miserably unhappy youth or at least not allow it to intrude upon his future.

52. Ephraim The name originally must have meant either “fertile land,” from the stem *p-r-h*, or “pastureland,” from *’afar*, preserved in postbiblical Hebrew.²⁴ Either etymology would aptly describe the future territory of the tribe bearing this name, which was located west of the Jordan in the central region. It was blessed with good soil and rainfall.

made me fertile Hebrew *hifrani*, an obvious word play on Ephraim (cf. Hos. 13:12,15). All biblical Hifil forms of the stem *p-r-h* refer to the blessing of abundant posterity.²⁵ However, it is curious that such language should be used here after the birth of only the second child. There may be a hint here of the later history of the tribe: Moses bestows upon Joseph a fertility blessing in his farewell address in Deuteronomy 33:13–17, and he explicitly refers to “the myriads of Ephraim” and “the thousands of Manasseh.”

⁵³The seven years of abundance that the land of Egypt enjoyed came to an end, ⁵⁴and 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.

שְׁנֵי הַשָּׁבָע אֲשֶׁר הָיָה בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:
54 וַתְּחַלִּינָה שְׁבַע שָׁנֵי הָרָעָב לְבוֹא בְּאֶשֶׁר אָמַר
יוֹסֵף וַיְהִי רָעָב בְּכָל-הָאֲרָצוֹת וּבְכָל-אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם

my affliction That is, where I spent thirteen years in captivity. The same Hebrew word *'oni* is often used of the later Israelite bondage in Egypt,²⁶ and is most likely an intended allusion here to the larger purposes of the Joseph story and to its role in the divine plan of history. This would explain the antithetical usage of “affliction” and “fertility,” even though they do not form natural antonyms.

THE ONSET OF FAMINE (vv. 53–57)

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, as recorded by the Nilometers placed at strategic points along the river, 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 and the motif of seven-year famines are well documented in Egyptian and other Near Eastern texts. Several pertinent inscriptions, dating from the First Intermediate Period in Egyptian history (ca. 2250–2000 B.C.E.), have been discovered. Iti, the treasurer of the town of Imyotru, boasted that he supplied his fellow citizens with barley in years of famine and helped other towns as well. The steward Seneni of Coptus reported in his stela, or inscribed commemorative stone pillar, that “in the painful years of distress” he had rationed out barley to his town. Ankhtify, “the great chieftain of Nekhen,” recorded a seven-year famine in which the entire south of Egypt is said to have died of hunger and people devoured their own children. He took pride in having foreseen the event, caused by a low Nile, and in having been able to rush grain and grant loans of corn to various towns in order to alleviate the situation. Another famine inscription from this period comes from Ameny, a chief in the days of Senwosre I (ca. 1971–1928 B.C.E.), who recalled that in years of famine he had supplied wheat and barley to the people so that no one went hungry “until the great Nile had returned.” The most celebrated report of all is a late Ptolemaic inscription purporting to derive from King Djoser (ca. 28th cent. B.C.E.). A great misfortune had befallen the country: the Nile had not inundated the land for seven years. Grain was scarce, seeds had dried up, and all food was in short supply.

The motif of a seven-year famine is present even in fertile Mesopotamia. In the Gilgamesh Epic (6.102–106), the sky-god Anu threatens that “seven years of empty husks” could occur. From the Syro-Canaanite area comes the Ugaritic Epic of Aqht, which mentions the seven-year failure of Baal, the god of rain and thunder (1 Aqht 1.42–46). In addition, a copy of a mid-eighth century B.C.E. political treaty from the town of Sfire, about 16 miles (25.6 km.) southeast of Aleppo, has survived; among the curses to be imposed for a breach of its stipulations it includes seven years of famine. Finally, the same motif is found in Israel where the prophet Gad presents David with a choice of punishments, among them seven years of famine, as related in 2 Samuel 24:13. All this demonstrates the existence of a widespread Near Eastern literary convention defining severe famine in terms of a seven-year duration.

54. in all lands The phenomenon is emphasized three times in this brief section because it is to be the essential factor causing the descent of Joseph's brothers to Egypt. In actuality, of course, there could not be any natural connection between the famine in Egypt and that in neighboring countries since the two had entirely unrelated causes (cf. Zech. 14:17f.). The situation in Canaan resulted from a prolonged lack of rainfall that had nothing to do with the failure of the Nile to rise.

⁵⁵And 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.”—⁵⁶Accordingly, 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. ⁵⁷So all the world came to Joseph in Egypt to procure rations, for the famine had become severe throughout the world.

הָיָה לָחֶם: 55 וַתִּרְעַב כָּל־אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וַיִּצְעַק
הָעָם אֶל־פַּרְעֹה לֶחֶם וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה לְכֹל־מִצְרַיִם
לָכוּ אֶל־יוֹסֵף אֲשֶׁר־יֹאמַר לָכֶם תַּעֲשׂוּ: 56 וַהֲרַעֵב
הָיָה עַל כָּל־פְּנֵי הָאָרֶץ וַיִּפְתַּח יוֹסֵף אֶת־כָּל־
אֲשֶׁר בָּהֶם וַיִּשְׁבֵּר לְמִצְרַיִם וַיַּחֲזֵק הָרַעֵב בְּאֶרֶץ
מִצְרַיִם: 57 וְכָל־הָאָרֶץ באו מִצְרַיִם לְשֹׁבֵר אֶל־
יוֹסֵף כִּי־חֲזַק הָרַעֵב בְּכָל־הָאָרֶץ:

42 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? ²Now I hear,” he went on, “that there are rations to be had in Egypt. Go down and procure rations

מ"ב וַיֵּרָא יַעֲקֹב כִּי יֵשׁ־שֹׁבֵר בְּמִצְרַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר
יַעֲקֹב לְבָנָיו לָמָּה תִּתְרָאוּ: 2 וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה שְׂמִיעֵתִי
כִּי יֵשׁ־שֹׁבֵר בְּמִצְרַיִם רְדוּ־שָׁמָּה וּשְׁבֵרוּ־לָנוּ מִשָּׂם

55. This verse, too, anticipates the next episode. It explains why the brothers have to appear in person before Joseph (cf. v. 57).

56. For the sake of clarity and continuity with verse 55, the English has inverted the order of the clauses.

within Hebrew *bahem*, literally “in them,” has no antecedent. The ancient versions variously rendered “all the granaries” (Septuagint, Vulg., Pesh.), “all the granaries in which was grain” (Targs.), and “everything in which was grain” (Sam.). These either reflect a different text or are attempts to interpret the difficult Hebrew.

rationed out grain See Comment to 42:1.

over the whole world Literally, “over all the face of the land,” an inversion of the usual word order.²⁷

CHAPTER 42

Joseph and His Brothers—Once Again (42:1–43:34)

Just when Joseph has reached a point in his life where he prefers not to be reminded of his past, he is forced to confront it by the rush of events. Once again he finds himself face to face with his brothers. On the previous, disastrous occasion, Joseph had been sent by his father to them; now it is they whom Jacob sends, unknowingly, to Joseph. Then Joseph had been at the mercy of his brothers; now he is master of the situation, and they come as suppliants.

THE BROTHERS’ JOURNEY TO EGYPT (vv. 1–5)

I. *saw* He observed his countrymen returning from Egypt laden with supplies.¹

there were food rations Hebrew *yesh shever*. The term *shever*, “rations,” and its verbal forms, as in 41:57 and 42:6, derive from a stem meaning “to break,” namely, “hunger/thirst,”² and are mainly used in emergency situations.

looking at one another Inactive and helpless. The Hebrew Hitpael verbal form is taken to express reciprocal action. Elsewhere, this form of the verb *r-ʿ-h* is always followed by *panim*, “face,” in the sense of “to meet in combat.” Since the Hitpael conjugation frequently expresses affectation,³ the phrase may be rendered, “Why do you make an outward show” of being well supplied?

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.

⁶Now Joseph was the vizier 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 to the ground.⁷ When Joseph saw his brothers, he

וַנַּחֲיָהּ וְלֹא נָמוּת: 3 וַיֵּרְדוּ אֶחָיו יוֹסֵף עִשְׂרֵה לְשֹׁבֵר בָּר מִמִּצְרַיִם: 4 וְאֶת־בְּנֵימִין אֶחָיו יוֹסֵף לֹא־שָׁלַח יַעֲקֹב אֶת־אֶחָיו כִּי אָמַר פֶּן־יִקְרָאֵנּוּ אִסּוּז: 5 וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְשׁוֹבֵר בְּתוֹךְ הַבָּאִים כִּי־הָיָה הָרָעָב בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן: 6 וַיּוֹסֶף הוּא הַשְּׁלִיט עַל־הָאֶרֶץ הוּא הַמְּשַׁבֵּיר לְכָל־עַם הָאֶרֶץ וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶחָיו יוֹסֵף וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ־לוֹ אַפַּיִם אֲרָצָה: 7 וַיֵּרָא יוֹסֵף אֶת־אֶחָיו וַיִּכְרַם וַיִּתְנַבֵּר אֲלֵיהֶם וַיְדַבֵּר אֲתָם

2. When the narrative spotlight last shone on Jacob, we witnessed a pitiable spectacle of an inconsolable father mourning his lost son. Now, after an interval of over twenty years, the old patriarch is once again the man of action, exercising authority and initiative in a critical situation.

3. *ten of Joseph’s brothers* Not “Joseph’s ten brothers,” because there were eleven in all. The rations in Egypt must have been available on a limited per capita basis, so that the presence and services of all ten were needed to purchase and transport sufficient supplies for their large households (cf. Gen. 46:7–27). Reasons of security may also have dictated the need to travel as a convoy on the journey, which lasted a week each way.

The descriptive “brothers of Joseph” (so v. 6) in place of the expected “sons of Jacob” is a subtle anticipation by the Narrator of the ensuing encounter.

went down Underlying the phrase (Heb. *va-yerdu*) is a possible allusion to the reversal of fortunes that has taken place since Joseph was “brought down” (Heb. *hurad*) to Egypt (Gen. 39:1).

4. *Joseph’s brother Benjamin* The description explains the special status of Benjamin, who has replaced Joseph as his father’s favorite (Gen. 44:20). At the same time, the reader is reminded that the two were full brothers, a fact that will be significant in subsequent developments.

might meet with disaster Benjamin’s mother, Rachel, and his brother have both met with misfortune in the course of a journey.⁴

5. *the sons of Israel* The change in designation (Heb. *benei yisra’el*) is significant—an intimation that the journey to Egypt has national import. The brothers come as a unit, as a nation in embryo.

among those who came Just one among many such groups who came from neighboring countries⁵—yet they alone attract attention.

THE FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH JOSEPH (vv. 6–17)

6. *vizier* This title of Joseph, in addition to “seller of corn,” explains in what capacity he interrogated and accused the brothers. A man who was solely the dispenser of rations would not normally be concerned with matters of state security.

The Hebrew term *shallit*, “vizier,” is otherwise only found in postexilic Hebrew texts. Nevertheless, it is of interest that the Hyksos founder of the Fifteenth Dynasty in Egypt was King Salitis, a name that seems to reflect the same word. Furthermore, *šaltum* and *šālītum* appear in Old Assyrian documents.

bowed low Joseph’s boyhood dreams (Gen. 37:7,9f.) are being fulfilled.

7. *acted like a stranger* Hebrew *va-yitnakker*, from *nokhri*, “stranger.” It may also be rendered, “he hid his identity from them.”⁶ The Hebrew not only contains an internal play on

recognized them; but he acted like a stranger toward 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." ⁸For though Joseph recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him. ⁹Recalling 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." ¹⁰But they said to him, "No, my lord! Truly, your servants have come to procure food. ¹¹We are all of us sons of the same man; we are honest men; your servants have never been spies!" ¹²And he said to them, "No, you have come to see the land in its nakedness!" ¹³And they

קשות ויאמר אלהם מאין באתם ויאמרו מארץ
פגען לשבר-אכל: ⁸ ויזכר יוסף את-אחיו והם
לא הכירוהו: ⁹ ויזכר יוסף את החלמות אשר
חלם להם ויאמר אלהם מרגלים אתם לראות
את-ערות הארץ באתם: ¹⁰ ויאמרו אליו לא
אדני ועבדיך באו לשבר-אכל: ¹¹ בלנו בני
איש-אחד נחנו בנים אנחנו לא-היו עבדיך
מרגלים: ¹² ויאמר אלהם לא ביערות הארץ
באתם לראות: ¹³ ויאמרו שנים עשר עבדיך

words—*va-yitnakker-va-yakkirem* ("he recognized them")—but also is perhaps playfully allusive to Genesis 37:18—*va-yitnakklū*, "they conspired." Joseph now schemes against the erstwhile schemers.

to procure food To each question the brothers respond with unsolicited information.

8. Joseph recognized The repetition of this fact is simply due to the stylistic need for an equipoise to the new fact, "they did not recognize him."⁷

they did not recognize him Not surprisingly, for since their last meeting over twenty years ago, Joseph has developed from boyhood into mature manhood. In addition, his language, his dress, and even his name have all become Egyptianized.

9. Recalling the dreams The sight of his brothers prostrating themselves before him suddenly reminds Joseph of those long-forgotten dreams, and he realizes for the first time that they had actually presaged his future. Yet he cannot help but recall as well the hatreds they had engendered. He must have heard his brothers mention those dreams derisively as they threw him into the pit.⁸

Joseph now finds himself caught in a maelstrom of conflicting emotions. His sense of contentment is shaken by his unpleasant memories. The instinctive desire for revenge is tempered by the knowledge that his father and brother back in Canaan may be starving and are depending on the acquisition of provisions in Egypt. He is desperate for news of their welfare but dares not give himself away by overly anxious inquiry. Above all, he feels he must find out conclusively whether or not his brothers regret their actions and have truly reformed themselves. He decides upon a series of tests.

You are spies They were foreigners and had entered Egypt from the northeast. This was the land's most vulnerable border. Incursions into Egypt by Asians coming via "the Way of Horus," the military highway from Canaan that led through Gaza to El-'Arish, were a recurrent phenomenon. Frontier guards would routinely check every traveler, for the discovery of spies might herald an imminent attack.⁹ Thus an allegation of espionage provided a convenient pretext under which Joseph could have the brothers arrested and subjected to psychological pressure.

the land in its nakedness Hebrew *'ervat ha-'arets* has its analogy in Isaiah 20:4, "the nakedness of Egypt," in the sense of "the shame of Egypt" as a conquered state. Similarly, at the downfall of Jerusalem, peoples are said to "have seen her disgraced" (Lam. 1:8). Thus the figure here means to uncover any defects in its fortifications.

10. Truly, your servants Hebrew *va-'avadekha*. The initial *vav* is here taken as having affirmative force. It could also be adversative: "to the contrary."

11. We are all of us . . . We are one family unit and would not jeopardize the lives of all of us by collectively engaging in such a dangerous occupation.¹⁰ This refutation of the accusation of espionage is felt to be so compelling as to warrant reiteration (v. 13).

replied, “We your servants were twelve 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, 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.

¹⁸On the third day Joseph said to them, “Do this and you shall live, for I am a God-fearing man. ¹⁹If 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 households; ²⁰but 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

אֲחֵיהֶם אֲנַחְנוּ בְנֵי אִישׁ־אֶחָד בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וְהִנֵּה
הַקְטָן אֶת־אֲבִינוּ הַיּוֹם וְהָאֶחָד אֵינְנוּ: ¹⁴ וַיֹּאמֶר
אֲלֵהֶם יוֹסֵף הוּא אֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתִּי אֲלֵכֶם לֵאמֹר
מְרַגְלִים אַתֶּם: ¹⁵ בְּזֹאת תִּבְחָנוּ חַי פְּרֹעָה אִם־
תֵּצְאוּ מִזֶּה כִּי אִם־כָּבֹא אֲחֵיכֶם הַקְטָן הִנֵּה:
¹⁶ שְׁלְחוּ מִכֶּם אֶחָד וַיִּקַּח אֶת־אֲחֵיכֶם וְאֶת־
הָאֶסְרוּ וַיִּבְחָנוּ דְּבַרְיָכֶם הֲאֵמֶת אַתֶּם וְאִם־לֹא
חַי פְּרֹעָה כִּי מְרַגְלִים אַתֶּם: ¹⁷ וַיֹּאסֶף אֹתָם אֶל־
מִשְׁמַר שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים: ¹⁸ וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם יוֹסֵף בְּיָוֶם
הַשְּׁלִישִׁי זֹאת עֲשׂוּ וְחַיּוּ אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים אֲנִי יְרֵא:
חַמִּישִׁי ¹⁹ אִם־כִּינִים אַתֶּם אֲחֵיכֶם אֶחָד יֹאסֶר
בְּבֵית מִשְׁמַרְכֶּם וְאֶתֶם לָכוּ הִבִּיאוּ שָׂבֵר הַעֲבוּן
בְּתֵיכֶם: ²⁰ וְאֶת־אֲחֵיכֶם הַקְטָן תִּבְיִאוּ אֵלַי
וְיִאֲמְנוּ דְּבַרְכֶם וְלֹא תִמּוּתוּ וַיַּעֲשׂוּ־כֵן:

13. one is no more The phrasing may either reflect their uncertainty as to Joseph’s fate or be a delicate way of saying that he was dead. Later on, Judah explicitly states the latter.¹¹ Joseph does not pursue the point.

14. Joseph peremptorily rejects their defense in a show of despotic arbitrariness. The burden of disproof is on the brothers.

15. by Pharaoh Literally, “the life of Pharaoh.” This phrase gives the following statement the character of an oath, validated and sanctioned by the awesome power of the king. An oath of this type is found in an Egyptian inscription as early as the twentieth century B.C.E. In Israel, too, it was the practice to swear by the life of the king (cf. 1 Sam. 17:55; 2 Sam. 14:19) as well as by God (cf. 1 Sam. 25:26; 2 Sam. 15:21).

16. This is the first of the tests Joseph imposes. How would they stand the strain of imprisonment? What rivalries would surface as a result of their awareness that only one would return to Canaan and that the fate of all others would depend on that one?

17. guardhouse Hebrew *mishmar* (so v. 19), the same term as used previously for the place of Joseph’s imprisonment. Its use hints at a sort of retributive justice.

THE SECOND ENCOUNTER WITH JOSEPH (vv. 18–26)

18. It is not clear whether Joseph originally intended only a three-day incarceration and made his threat (v. 15) in order to exert psychological pressure, or whether he now changes his mind. If the latter is the case, Joseph must have become conscious of the terrible suffering, perhaps fatal in its consequences, that he would be inflicting on his father by detaining nine of the brothers. Furthermore, how would the starving families back home obtain food?

a God-fearing man Fearing God is the ultimate restraint on perfidy (see Comment to 20:11).

20. that you may not die Joseph has forced the brothers into a position in which they have no choice but to bring Benjamin in order to avoid dying of hunger.

And they did accordingly This editorial remark echoes verse 18, “Do this.” It means they agreed to the conditions.

one another, “Alas, we are being punished on account of our brother, because we looked on at his anguish, 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.

²⁷As one of them was opening his sack to give feed to his

21 וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל-אָחִיו אֲבָל אֲשָׁמִים אֲנַחְנוּ
עַל-אָחִינוּ אֲשֶׁר רָאִינוּ צָרָת נַפְשׁוֹ בְּהִתְחַנְּנֵנוּ
אֲלֵינוּ וְלֹא שָׁמַעְנוּ עַל-פִּי בָּאָה אֲלֵינוּ הַצָּרָה
הַזֹּאת: 22 וַיַּעַן רְעוּבֵן אֶתֶם לֵאמֹר הֲלוֹא אָמַרְתִּי
אֲלֵיכֶם לֵאמֹר אֶל-תִּחַטְּאוּ בְיָלֶד וְלֹא שָׁמַעְתֶּם
וְגַם-דָּמּוּ הַגֵּה נִדְרָשׁ: 23 וְהֵם לֹא יָדְעוּ כִּי שָׁמַע
יוֹסֵף כִּי הִמְלִיץ בִּינְתָם: 24 וַיֹּסֵב מֵעֲלֵיהֶם וַיִּבְךְ
וַיָּשָׁב אֲלֵהֶם וַיְדַבֵּר אֲלֵהֶם וַיִּקַּח מֵאֵתָם אֶת-
שְׁמֹעוֹן וַיֹּאסֶר אֹתוֹ לְעֵינָיהֶם: 25 וַיִּצְוּ יוֹסֵף
וַיִּמְלְאוּ אֶת-כָּלֵיהֶם כֶּרֶךְ וְלִהְיֵיב כֶּסֶפֵיהֶם אִישׁ
אֶל-שָׁקוֹ וְלִתְתֹת לָהֶם צֶדֶה לַדֶּרֶךְ וַיַּעַשׂ לָהֶם כֵּן:
26 וַיִּשְׂאוּ אֶת-שִׁבְרָם עַל-חֲמֹרֵיהֶם וַיֵּלְכוּ מִשָּׁם:
27 וַיִּפְתַּח הָאָחִיד אֶת-שָׁקוֹ לְתֵת מִסֻּפּוֹ לַחֲמֹרוֹ

21. *Alas* Hebrew *'aval* apparently has this meaning also in 2 Samuel 14:5 and 2 Kings 4:14. The Targums understood it as having asseverative force, “assuredly.”

we are being punished Hebrew *'ashem* can mean both guilt and its consequent punishment (cf. Pss. 34:22), the two being inseparable in Israelite thought (see Comment to 4:13). In this moment of common adversity, their long-smoldering, tortured consciences erupt.

anguish . . . distress Hebrew uses *tsarah* in both clauses, emphasizing again the aspect of retributive justice.

22. *Do no wrong* An embellishment of Reuben’s speech as reported in 37:22.

the reckoning for his blood On this phrase, see Comment to 9:5. Reuben had warned his brothers (37:22), “Shed no blood!” Apparently, he believes Joseph is dead (cf. 37:29–30).

23. *an interpreter* This is the only instance in the patriarchal narratives when free and direct communication is impeded by differences in language.

between him and them This is the force of Hebrew *beinotam*.¹²

24. *and wept* Joseph is deeply affected by the genuineness of the contrition behind the exchange of words, but for the present he must hide his emotions and suppress his deep natural sympathy for his brothers.

Simeon Having overheard that Reuben, the eldest, had tried to save his life, Joseph selects the next in seniority to be detained. Besides, Simeon had a reputation for cruelty¹³ and may well have been the one who actually led the others in persecuting Joseph.

before their eyes To show that his threats were to be taken seriously and to test their solidarity.

25. *each one’s money* Hebrew *kaspeihem*. This plural form of *keseף*, “money,” used also in verse 35 and employed nowhere else in biblical Hebrew, indicates the several individual bags of money. Did Joseph mean to test their integrity or intensify the psychological pressure? His motivation here is unclear.

THE RETURN TO CANAAN (vv. 27–38)

27. *one of them* The use of the definite article in Hebrew (*ha-’ehad*) led the midrash to identify him with Levi, the next in seniority after Simeon.¹⁴

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?”

²⁹When 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 twelve 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.’”

³⁵As 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

בַּמְלוֹן וַיִּרְא אֶת־כֶּסֶפוֹ וְהִנֵּה־הוּא בְּפִי אֲמַתְחָתוֹ:
²⁸ וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־אֶחָיו הַיּוֹשֵׁב כֶּסֶפִי וְגַם הִנֵּה
 בְּאֲמַתְחָתִי וַיֵּצֵא לָבָס וַיַּחְרְדּוּ אִישׁ אֶל־אֶחָיו
 לֵאמֹר מַה־זֹּאת עָשָׂה אֱלֹהִים לָנוּ: ²⁹ וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶל־
 יַעֲקֹב אַבְיֵיהֶם אַרְצָה בְּנֹעַן וַיְגִידוּ לוֹ אֵת כָּל־
 הַקִּרְתָּ אֲתָם לֵאמֹר: ³⁰ דִּבֶּר הָאִישׁ אֲדָנִי הָאֶרֶץ
 אֲתָנוּ קִשּׁוֹת וַיִּתֵּן אֲתָנוּ בְּמַרְגְּלִים אֶת־הָאֶרֶץ:
³¹ וַנֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו בְּנִים אֲנַחְנוּ לֹא הִיָּינוּ מַרְגְּלִים:
³² שְׁנַיִם־עָשָׂר אֲנַחְנוּ אָחִים בְּנֵי אָבִינוּ הָאֶחָד
 אֵינָנו וְהַקָּטָן הַיּוֹם אֶת־אָבִינוּ בְּאֶרֶץ בְּנֹעַן:
³³ וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלֵינוּ הָאִישׁ אֲדָנִי הָאֶרֶץ בְּזֹאת אֲדַע
 כִּי בְנִים אַתֶּם אֲחֵיכֶם הָאֶחָד הִנִּיחוּ אֵתִי וְאֵת־
 רַעְבּוֹן בְּתִיכֶם קָחוּ וּלְכוּ: ³⁴ וְהָבִיאוּ אֶת־אֲחֵיכֶם
 הַקָּטָן אֵלַי וְאֲדַעָה כִּי לֹא מַרְגְּלִים אַתֶּם כִּי בְנִים
 אַתֶּם אֶת־אֲחֵיכֶם אֲתֵן לָכֶם וְאֶת־הָאֶרֶץ תִּסְתַּחֲרוּ:
³⁵ וַיְהִי הֵם מְרִיקִים שִׁקְיָהֶם וְהִנֵּה־אִישׁ צְרוּר־
 כֶּסֶף בְּשִׁקּוֹ וַיִּרְאוּ אֶת־צְרוּרוֹת כֶּסֶפֵיהֶם הֵמָּה
 וַאֲבִיהֶם וַיִּירָאוּ: ³⁶ וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יַעֲקֹב אַבְיֵיהֶם

night encampment Pastoral nomads did not stay in inns but in crude tent encampments.¹⁵

bag Hebrew *'amtahat* is employed fifteen times in this story but never elsewhere in the Bible. On the basis of Assyrian *matāhu*, “to bear, carry, lift up,” it must mean “a pack,” and it was so understood by the Targums. It is thus to be distinguished from “a sack.” It should be noted that *befi*, “at the mouth of,” is used only with *'amtahat*, never with “sack,” and that the latter term appears only in the narrative framework, never in reported speech, which is concerned with the actual discovery of the money.¹⁶ It must be assumed, then, that the “pack” (*'amtahat*) was inside a sack.

28. The unexpected find engenders a sense of foreboding. They know they must return to Egypt, both to secure further supplies and to obtain the release of their imprisoned brother.

What is this . . . Conveys the sense of being completely at the mercy of fate.

29–30. The brothers report to their father with an economy of information, narrating only what is necessary to explain Simeon’s absence and to stress the importance of sending Benjamin next time. They say nothing of the three days in detention, of the shackling of Simeon “before their eyes,” or of finding the money.

33. and take . . . households Literally, “and take the starvation of your households.” All the ancient versions render the Hebrew as though a word has dropped out of the text.¹⁷

34. free to move about Or, “to trade in . . .”; for Hebrew stem *s-h-r*, see Comment to 34:10.

35. It is obvious that all the brothers must have dipped into their packs for food or fodder in the course of their six-day (or so) return journey. Therefore, each must have discovered his money long before reaching Canaan. As a matter of fact, that is what they tell Joseph on the next trip (43:21). We must assume, therefore, that they had prearranged to tell their father nothing of this and to stage the “discovery” in his presence.

saw . . . dismayed The Hebrew contains a word play (*va-yir'u-va-yira'u*).¹⁸

said to them, “It is always me that you bereave: 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.”

43 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,

אתי שבלתם יוסף איננו ושמעון איננו ואת-
בנימין תקחו עלי הו כלנה: 37 ויאמר ראובן
אל-אביו לאמר את-שני בני תמית אם-לא
אביאנו אליך תנה אתו על-ידי ואני אשיבנו
אליך: 38 ויאמר לא-יירד בני עמכם כִּי-אחיו מת
והוא לבדו נשאר וקרֹאָהוּ אֶסֶן בְּדֶרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר
תלכוֹ-בָּהּ וְהוֹרַדְתֶּם אֶת-שִׁיבְתִי בִּגְזוֹן שְׂאוֹלָה:

מ"ג והרעב כבד בארץ: 2 ויהי כאשר בלו
לאכל את-השֶׁבֶר אשר הביאו ממצרים ויאמר
אליהם אביהם שבו שברוֹלֵנוּ מְעַט-אֶכֶל:
3 ויאמר אליו יהודה לאמר העד העד פִּנּוּ
האיש לאמר לא-תראו פְּנֵי בְלֹתִי אֲחִיכֶם

36. It is always me that you bereave The translation is determined by the emphatic position of the accusative particle ahead of the verb. The sense is: “It is I who suffer; it is my sons who disappear!”

37. Reuben He assumes leadership for the last time.

my two sons Since, according to 46:9, Reuben had four sons, the text probably means “two of my sons.”¹⁹

38. My son This formulation, instead of “your brother,” may well imply a rebuke, in that it echoes what the brothers said when they had Joseph’s tunic sent to their father: “Is it *your son’s* tunic?” (37:32).

is left That is, from his mother.

disaster on the journey Father and sons seem to be worried about different things. That is why Reuben’s self-confidence leaves Jacob unimpressed. Deeply concerned about the perils of the journey, the worried father does not see that Reuben is trying to assure him of an ultimate positive outcome—that the viceroy of Egypt will keep his promise.

CHAPTER 43

The Second Journey to Egypt

Jacob bluntly rejects Reuben’s plea and offer. Further discussion is now futile. The brothers know that the fear of starvation will ultimately overcome their father’s resistance. Indeed, Jacob has already recognized the need for another journey to Egypt.

1. **But** The initial Hebrew conjunctive *vav* has adversative force.

the famine . . . was severe Compare 12:10; 41:31; and 47:4,13.

2. **when they had eaten up** That is, the provisions are coming to an end. There is just enough food left to enable their families to survive while the brothers travel to Egypt and back.

3. **Judah** He is the spokesman from now on; Reuben is not heard from again, even though he is the first-born. The incident described in 35:22 shows that he has long been discredited.

we will go down and procure food for you; ⁵but 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.’” ⁶And Israel said, “Why did you serve me so ill as to tell the man that you had another brother?” ⁷They 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?’”

⁸Then 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. ⁹I 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. ¹⁰For we could have been there and back twice if we had not dawdled.”

אֶתְכֶם: 4 אִם־יִשְׁׁךְ מִשְׁלַח אֶת־אָחִינוּ אֲתָנוּ נִרְדֶּה וְנִשְׁבְּרָה לָךְ אֶכְלָ: 5 וְאִם־אֵינְךָ מִשְׁלַח לֹא נִרְדֶּ כִּי־הָאִישׁ אָמַר אֵלֵינוּ לֹא־תֵרְאוּ פָנַי בְּלִתי אֲחִיכֶם אֶתְכֶם: 6 וַיֹּאמֶר יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמָה הִרְעַתֶם לִי לְהַגִּיד לְאִישׁ הָעוֹד לְכֶם אֵח: 7 וַיֹּאמְרוּ שְׂאוֹל שְׂאֵל־הָאִישׁ לָנוּ וְלְמוֹלְדֹתֵנוּ לֵאמֹר הָעוֹד אֲבִיכֶם חַי הִישׁ לְכֶם אֵח וְנִגְד־לִו עַל־פִּי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה הַיְדוּעַ נִדְעַ כִּי יֹאמֶר הוֹרִידוּ אֶת־אֲחִיכֶם: 8 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוּדָה אֶל־יִשְׂרָאֵל אָבִיו שְׁלַחְהָ הַנְּעַר אִתִּי וְנִקְוָמָה וְנִלְכְּהָ וְנַחֲיָהּ וְלֹא נָמוּת גַּם־אֲנַחְנוּ גַם־אַתָּה גַם־טַפְנוּ: 9 אֲנֹכִי אֶעֱרָכְנוּ מִיָּדִי תִבְקָשׁנוּ אִם־לֹא הִבִּיאֲתוּ אֵלַיְךָ וְהִצַּגְתִּיו לְפָנֶיךָ וְחָטַאתִי לָךְ כְּל־הַיָּמִים: 10 כִּי לֹלֵא הִתְמַהֲמַהְנוּ כִּי־עַתָּה שָׁבְנוּ זֶה פְעָמִים: 11 וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים

The man Abbreviated from “the man who is lord of the land” (42:30,33). Joseph is henceforth called “the man,” while the brothers are correspondingly termed “the men.”¹ This anonymity is an artful device of the Narrator—just as events move toward the climactic moment when Joseph discloses his true identity and is reconciled with his brothers.

warned Hebrew *ha'ed he'id* expresses a solemn admonition tantamount to a threat.²

7. The report now given by the brothers to their father does not correspond to the account of the interrogation in chapter 42, where the brothers appeared to offer unsolicited information about themselves quite freely (vv. 11,13). However, from 44:19 it is clear that Joseph had indeed asked the specific questions referred to here. Accordingly, it must be assumed that chapter 42 represents a very abbreviated account.

our family Hebrew *moledet* is used here in the sense of “kindred,” not “homeland.”³

8–10. The argument has reached a dead end. Judah steps in to save the situation. His approach is forthright, firm, sober, and severely to the point. The issue must be confronted headlong. Unless Benjamin is sent, the entire family is doomed to slow death by starvation. That is the awful and urgent reality. There is no alternative.

8. *you and we and our children* Judah actually lists them in ascending order of importance to himself (lit. “we and you and our children”).

the boy Hebrew *na'ar*. Benjamin is referred to in this manner repeatedly in the next chapter (44:22,30–34). Elsewhere he is described as *ha-katan*, “the youngest” (42:13,15,20; 43:29; 44:23,26), and even as “a child (*yeled*) of old age” (44:20), while Joseph blesses him as “my son” (43:29). We are given the clear impression that Benjamin is still very young. The probability of his youthfulness accords with, and renders particularly poignant, Jacob’s fears and reluctance to let him undertake the journey to Egypt. The term *na'ar* is flexible in biblical Hebrew and can be used of any male from infancy (Exod. 2:6) to marriageable age (Gen. 34:19).

9. *I myself* The addition of the separate personal pronoun has the force of an emphatic, meaning “I personally.”

be surety To underline the seriousness with which he is willing to assume the guardianship of Benjamin, Judah employs two distinct legal idioms. The Hebrew stem *ʿ-r-p* is most frequently used in reference to the acceptance of legal responsibility for a debt contracted by another. The guarantor may undertake to insure that the borrower will not disappear, or he undertakes to repay the loan should the borrower default. The second idiom, *le-vakkesh mi-yad*, means “to hold responsible,” “to require an accounting for,” and is particularly used with respect to bloodshed.⁴

¹¹Then 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. ¹²And 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. ¹³Take your

יִשְׂרָאֵל אָבִיהֶם אָסֶּכֶן אִפּוֹאֹה זֹאת עֲשׂוּ קָחוּ
מִזְמַרְתֵּי הָאָרֶץ בְּכֻלֵּיכֶם וְהוֹרִידוּ לְאִישׁ מִנְחָה
מֵעֵט צְרִי וּמֵעֵט דְּבַשׁ נִכְאֹת וְלֵט בְּטַנִּים
וּשְׂקָדִים: ¹² וְכֶסֶף מִשְׁנֵה קָחוּ בְיַדְכֶם וְאֶת־הַכֶּסֶף
הַמּוֹשָׁב בְּפִי אֲמַתְחֹתֵיכֶם תְּשִׁיבוּ בְיַדְכֶם אוֹלֵי

I shall stand guilty before you The Hebrew verb *h-t-*³ encompasses not merely the offensive act itself but also its aftereffects: the deleterious psychic, spiritual, and emotional state that it creates.

forever The consciousness of ineradicable personal guilt and blame would weigh upon him always as an oppressive burden.

11. If it must be so Judah’s forceful speech has its effect. The aged Jacob offers no further resistance and resigns himself to the inevitable.

do this He unwittingly echoes Joseph’s own words (42:18). Still the man of action, he gives orders that two steps be taken: Joseph must be mollified with a gift, and the payments for the grain must be returned.

choice products of the land This translation of the unique Hebrew *zimrat ha-’arets* follows the Targums, Peshitta, and Vulgate and is based on taking *zimrat* as a derivative of the stem *z-m-r* “to sing,” here meaning that which is celebrated in song. More likely, the term here represents the well-known Semitic root *d-m-r*, “to be strong,” which appears in Exodus 15:2 (= Isa. 12:2; Pss. 118:14), “The LORD is my strength and might (*zimrat*),” and Psalms 119:54, “Your laws are a source of strength (*zemiroth*) to me,” as well as in the biblical names Zimran (Gen. 25:2), Zimri (Num. 25:14), and Zemirah (1 Chron. 7:8). The stem is also widely found in many extrabiblical names, such as the north Israelite *b’lzmri*; the Phoenician *dmr* and *zmr*; the Ugaritic *dmrb’l* and *dmrhd*; the West Semitic (Mari) *zimri-alum*, *zimri-erah*, and *zimri-lim*; and the Old South Arabic *dmr’l*, *dmrkrb*, and *dmrmr*. The noun *zimrah* used in this verse would thus correspond to Hebrew *koah*, “strength,” also used in a transferred sense of “yield, produce” (cf. Gen. 4:12; Hos. 7:9; Job 31:39).

gift Hebrew *minhah* signifies a gift brought as a token of submission.⁵ The composition of the gift recalls the wares of the caravaneers who had originally sold Joseph into Egyptian slavery (see Comment to 37:25). It is ironic that these same products, and more, constitute the tribute the brothers now pay to Joseph himself.

honey Since there is no evidence of apiculture in the Land of Israel in biblical times, it is not certain whether Hebrew *devash* means bees’ honey, cultured or wild (cf. Deut. 32:13; 1 Sam. 14:25ff.; Pss. 85:17), or the thick, intensely sweet syrup made from dates and grape juice and called *dibs* by the Arabs. A celebrated description of the land is one “flowing with milk and honey” (Exod. 3:8, etc.), and the latter is listed as one of its seven characteristic products (Deut. 8:8). According to rabbinic tradition, the reference here is to date syrup. “Honey” was one of the products Israel exported to its neighbors (Ezek. 27:17). Of interest in connection with the gift brought to Joseph is the Story of Sinuhe, a popular Egyptian tale from Middle Kingdom times, in which “the land of Yaa” (southern Syria or northern Israel) is described as “a good land” where figs and grapes were plentiful and honey and olives abundant, with every kind of fruit on its trees, much barley and emmer, and cattle galore.⁶

12. double the money Hebrew *kesef mishneh*, an appositional phrase, literally “money, double amount.” The rest of the sentence literally translates “and the money that was returned. . . .” The meaning is ambiguous. It could be either that Jacob is recommending the payment of a double restitution or that the brothers are being advised to purchase double rations this time in order to avoid having to return to Egypt again. However, verse 15 mentions only “double the money” (*mishneh kesef*) and verses 21–22 make clear that it is only twice the purchase price of food, and no other money, that is involved. Hence, the second clause of this verse must be understood as clarifying the reason for the double amount.

brother too; and go back at once to the man. ¹⁴And 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.”

¹⁵So 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. ¹⁶When 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.” ¹⁷The man did as Joseph said, and he brought the men into Joseph’s house. ¹⁸But 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.” ¹⁹So they went up to Joseph’s house steward and spoke to him at the entrance of the house. ²⁰“If you please, my lord,”

מִשְׁגָּה הוּא: ¹³ וְאֶת־אֲחֵיכֶם קָחוּ וְקוּמוּ שׁוּבוּ אֶל־הָאִישׁ: ¹⁴ וְאֵל שְׁדַי יִתֵּן לָכֶם רַחֲמִים לְפָנַי הָאִישׁ וְשַׁלַּח לָכֶם אֶת־אֲחֵיכֶם אַחֵר וְאֶת־בְּנִימִין וְאֲנִי כְּאִשֶׁר שָׁכַלְתִּי שָׁכַלְתִּי: ¹⁵ וַיִּקְחוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים אֶת־הַמָּנְחָה הַזֹּאת וּמִשְׁנֵה־כֶּסֶף לָקְחוּ בֵינֵם וְאֶת־בְּנִימִין וַיִּקְמוּ וַיֵּרְדוּ מִצְרַיִם וַיַּעֲמְדוּ לְפָנַי יוֹסֵף: שֵׁשׁ ¹⁶ וַיֵּרָא יוֹסֵף אֶתֶם אֶת־בְּנִימִין וַיֹּאמֶר לְאִשֶׁר עַל־בֵּיתוֹ הֲבֵא אֶת־הָאֲנָשִׁים הַבְּיָתָה וּטְבַח טֹבֵחַ וְהָכֵן כִּי אֲתִי יֵאָכְלוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים בַּצֹּהֲרָיִם: ¹⁷ וַיַּעַשׂ הָאִישׁ כְּכַאֲשֶׁר אָמַר יוֹסֵף וַיֵּבֵא הָאִישׁ אֶת־הָאֲנָשִׁים בֵּיתָה יוֹסֵף: ¹⁸ וַיֵּרְאוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים כִּי הוֹבֵאוּ בֵּית יוֹסֵף וַיֹּאמְרוּ עַל־דְּבַר הַכֶּסֶף הַשָּׁב בְּאִמְתַּחַת־יְנֵנוּ בַתְּחִלָּה אֲנַחְנוּ מוֹבָאִים לְהַתְגַּלֵּל עָלֵינוּ וּלְהַתְנַפֵּל עָלֵינוּ וְלִקְחַת אֶתְנוּ לְעֲבָדִים וְאֶת־חַמְרֵינוּ: ¹⁹ וַיִּגְשׁוּ אֶל־הָאִישׁ

a mistake Jacob would like to convince himself that the return of the money by the Egyptians has no sinister implications.

13. Take your brother Jacob leaves the most painful item till last. He says “your brother,” rather than Benjamin, in order to give emphasis to their fraternal responsibilities.

at once This is the force of Hebrew *ve-kumu* (see Comment to 27:43).

14. Having done all that is humanly possible, Jacob leaves the rest to God, whose blessing he invokes. On the divine title “El Shaddai,” see Excursus 11.

if I am to be bereaved . . . Jacob’s speech opens (v. 11) and closes on a note of resignation.⁷

THE BROTHERS IN JOSEPH’S HOUSE (vv. 15–34)

15. they presented themselves to Joseph Since on this occasion there is no contact between him and the brothers, the phrase simply means that they have arrived at the trading post over which Joseph presides. Perhaps he deliberately ignores them so as to feed their anxiety and intensify their fears. In addition, when told to proceed to the vizier’s house, the brothers must have become filled with dread. Of course, the surprise meal in his house is a necessary prelude to the subsequent scene. The convivial atmosphere deceptively dispels all foreboding while the stage is set for the contrived “theft” of the silver goblet.

16. his house steward Hebrew *’asher ‘al beito* (so 44:1,4), literally, “the one who is over his house.”

18. frightened Because they alone, of all the buyers of grain, are singled out for this treatment. The brothers are probably aware of the fact that high Egyptian officials maintained private dungeons in their homes (cf. v. 23; see Comment to 39:20).

as a pretext Hebrew *le-hitgolel ‘aleinu* is found nowhere else in this sense. It has been connected with Hebrew *biglal*, “because of” (cf. Gen. 39:5), that is, “to find a cause against us.”⁸

to attack us Hebrew *le-hitnappel ‘aleinu* is likewise unique and is taken as a reflexive of *n-f-l*, that is, “to throw oneself against us,” or “to attack.”

19. at the entrance They lose no time in forestalling an accusation.

they said, “we came down once before to procure food. ²¹But 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. ²²And we have brought down with us other money to procure food. We do not know who put the money in our bags.” ²³He 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.

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

²⁶When 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. ²⁷He greeted them, and he said, “How is your aged father of whom you spoke? Is he still in good health?” ²⁸They replied, “It is well with your servant our father; he is still in good health.” And they bowed and made obeisance.

²⁹Looking 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.” ³⁰With that, Joseph hurried out,

אֲשֶׁר עַל־בֵּית יוֹסֵף וַיִּדְבְּרוּ אֵלָיו פָּתַח הַבַּיִת:
²⁰ וַיֹּאמְרוּ בִּי אֲדֹנָי יָדָד יִרְדְּנוּ בַתְּחִלָּה לְשִׁבְר־
אֶכֶל: ²¹ וַיְהִי כִּי־בָאנוּ אֶל־הַמְּלֹאן וַנִּפְתַּחְתָּה אֶת־
אֲמָתֹתֵינוּ וַהֲנֵה כֶּסֶף־אִישׁ בְּפִי אֲמָתֹתָיו כֶּסֶפְנוּ
בְּמִשְׁקָלָו וַנִּשָּׁב אִתּוֹ בִּידְנֹנוּ: ²² וְכֶסֶף אַחֵר
הוֹרְדְנוּ בִידְנֹנוּ לְשִׁבְר־אֶכֶל לֹא יָדְעָנוּ מִי־שָׂם
כֶּסֶפְנוּ בְּאֲמָתֹתֵינוּ: ²³ וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁלוֹם לָכֶם אֵל־
תִּירָאוּ אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבִיכֶם נָתַן לָכֶם מִטְמוֹן
בְּאֲמָתֹתֵיכֶם כֶּסֶפְכֶם בָּא אֵלָי וַיֹּצֵא אֶלֶּהֶם
אֶת־שִׁמְעוֹן: ²⁴ וַיָּבֵא הָאִישׁ אֶת־הָאֲנָשִׁים בֵּיתָה
יוֹסֵף וַיִּתֵּן־מַיִם וַיְרַחֲצוּ רַגְלֵיהֶם וַיִּתֵּן מִסְפּוֹא
לְחֻמְרֵיהֶם: ²⁵ וַיִּכְנְוּ אֶת־הַמִּנְחָה עַד־בּוֹא יוֹסֵף
בְּצַהֲרַיִם כִּי שָׁמְעוּ כִּי־שָׂם יֹאכְלוּ לֶחֶם: ²⁶ וַיָּבֵא
יוֹסֵף הַבַּיִתָּה וַיָּבִיאוּ לוֹ אֶת־הַמִּנְחָה אֲשֶׁר־בְּיָדֵם
הַבַּיִתָּה וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ־לוֹ אַרְצָה: ²⁷ וַיִּשְׁאַל לָהֶם
לְשָׁלוֹם וַיֹּאמֶר הַשְׁלוֹם אֲבִיכֶם הַזֶּקֶן אֲשֶׁר
אָמַרְתֶּם הַעוֹדְנֹנוּ חַיִּי: ²⁸ וַיֹּאמְרוּ שְׁלוֹם לְעַבְדְּךָ
לְאֲבִינוּ עוֹדְנֵנוּ חַי וְיָקָדָו וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ: ²⁹ וַיִּשָּׂא עֵינָיו
וַיִּרְא אֶת־בְּנֵימִין אַחִיו בֶּן־אֲמוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר הֲזֶה
אַחִיכֶם הַקָּטָן אֲשֶׁר אָמַרְתֶּם אֵלָי וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים
יַחַנְךָ בְּנִי: שְׁבִיעִי ³⁰ וַיִּמְהַר יוֹסֵף כִּי־נִכְבְּרוּ

v. 26. א' רגושה

v. 28. וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ: ק'

21. *in full* Literally, “by its weight.” See Comment to 23:16.

22. *who put* Hebrew *sam*. They delicately refrain from using the stem *sh-w-v*, “return,” as hitherto (43:12,18; 42:28) so as to avoid any insinuation of chicanery on the part of an official.

23. The reassuring reply of the steward is intelligible only on the assumption that he is privy to Joseph’s scheme. His purpose is to lull them into a false sense of relief, reinforced by the release of Simeon.

I got your payment Literally, “your money came to me,” a legal formula of West Semitic traders confirming receipt of full payment and implying renunciation of any claim.⁹

24. *brought the men* . . . Repeated from verse 17 to resume the narrative after the digression (cf. 39:1).

27. *your aged father* The adjective was not reported in the account of the brothers’ first meeting with Joseph, but 44:20 shows that it had indeed been used (see Comment to v. 7).

in good health A closer definition of *shalom* in the first clause. Hebrew *hai* (cf. 1 Kings 20:32) usually means “living,” so that Joseph’s questions may be an instance of hysteron proteron, a figure of speech in which a logical sequence is inverted. Alternately, Joseph may immediately ask how Jacob is and then realize he should first inquire if he is still alive.

28. *bowed and made obeisance* Either as a sign of appreciation to Joseph for his solicitude in asking about their father’s welfare or as a gesture of gratitude to God, a physical equivalent of the verbal “Thank God.”

for he was overcome with feeling toward his brother and was on the verge of tears; he went into a room and wept there. ³¹Then he washed his face, reappeared, and—now in control of himself—gave the order, “Serve the meal.” ³²They 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 the Egyptians. ³³As 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. ³⁴Portions were served them from his table; but Benjamin’s portion was several times that of anyone else. And they drank their fill with him.

רַחֲמָיו אֶל-אָחִיו וַיִּבְקֶשׂ לִבְכוֹת וַיָּבֵא הַחֲדָרָה
וַיִּבְדֵּךְ שָׁמָּה: ³¹ וַיִּרְחֹץ פָּנָיו וַיֵּצֵא וַיִּתְאַפֵּק וַיֹּאמֶר
שִׁימוּ לָחֶם: ³² וַיִּשְׁימוּ לוֹ לִבְדּוֹ וְלָהֶם לְבָדִם
וּלְמִצְרַיִם הָאֲכָלִים אֹתוֹ לְבָדִם כִּי לֹא יוֹכְלוּן
הַמִּצְרַיִם לֶאֱכֹל אֶת-הָעֵבְרִים לָחֶם בִּיתְוַעֲבָה
הוּא לְמִצְרַיִם: ³³ וַיִּשְׁבוּ לִפְנֵי הַכּוֹרֵךְ כַּבְּכֻרְתּוֹ
וְהִצְעִיר כְּצַעֲרָתוֹ וַיִּתְמְהוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים אִישׁ אֶל-
רֵעֵהוּ: ³⁴ וַיִּשָּׂא מִשָּׂאת מֵאֵת פָּנָיו אֶלְהֶם וַתֵּרֵב
מִשָּׂאת בְּנִימִן מִמִּשָּׂאת כָּלֶם חֲמֵשׁ יָדוֹת וַיִּשְׁתּוּ
וַיִּשְׂבְּרוּ עִמּוֹ:

30. overcome with feeling The Hebrew idiom *nikhmeru rahamav* (lit. “his mercies were heated up”) occurs elsewhere only in 1 Kings 3:26,¹⁰ where it means “to have compassion for.” Here, however, Benjamin is not an object of pity. The sight of him arouses overwhelming feelings of tenderness and affection in Joseph. He can find relief only through tears.

on the verge of This is here the force of Hebrew *va-yevakkesh*, rather than the usual “he sought.” The stem *b-k-sh* in postbiblical Hebrew (cf. Mish. Yoma 1:7) and its Aramaic equivalent *b-‘y* (cf. Dan. 2:13) often carry the meaning “to be about to.”

31. Serve the meal Joseph hosts a meal for his brothers, who years before had callously sat down to eat while he languished in the pit (see Comment to 37:25)—a piquant note.

32. Joseph eats alone undoubtedly because of his exalted status; but the segregation of the Hebrews was due to the Egyptian feeling of racial and religious superiority that engendered contempt for foreigners, who were regarded as unclean. Herodotus (Histories, 2.41) reports that because the cow was taboo to Egyptians but eaten by Greeks, no native of Egypt would kiss a Greek, use his kitchen utensils, or even eat the flesh of an ox that had been cut with the knife of a Greek. It is therefore likely that Egyptian particularism asserted itself here because the Hebrews were shepherds—an abhorrent profession (46:34)—and because they ate sheep—an abomination to Egyptians (Exod. 8:22).

could not dine The observation is given in the idiom of a legal formula¹¹ expressing prohibition, not disability.

Hebrews Compare 40:15; see Comment to 14:13.

33. were seated by his direction Literally, “they sat before him.” Saadiah and Rashbam point out that the seating arrangement by descending order of seniority can only be at Joseph’s direction. This arouses the surprise of the brothers. A midrash in Genesis Rabba 92:5 has Joseph himself pretending to divine their order of birth by means of his silver goblet (cf. 44:5,15). Hizkuni suggests that the brothers usually seat themselves for meals in this manner and that their wonderment is occasioned by their segregation. It is likely, in fact, that the Egyptians, too, are amazed that the vizier should invite foreigners, especially shepherds, to dine at his house.

34. several Literally, “five,” a round number (see Comment to 41:34). Joseph is perhaps testing his brothers to see whether this obvious favoritism would arouse their envy or expose any hostile feelings that they might harbor against the one who is now their father’s favorite.

44 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. ²Put 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.

³With the first light of morning, the men were sent off with their pack animals. ⁴They 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?’ ⁵It is the very one from which

מד ויצו את אשר על ביתו לאמר מלא את אמתחת האנשים אכל באשר ויכלון שאת ושים כסף איש בפי אמתחתו: ² ואת גביעי גביע הכסף תשים בפי אמתחת הקטן ואת כסף שברו ויעש כדבר יוסף אשר דבר: ³ הבקר אור והאנשים שלחו המה ותמריהם: ⁴ הם יצאו את העיר לא הרחיקו ויוסף אמר לאשר על ביתו קום רדף אחרי האנשים והשגתם ואמרת אליהם למה שלמתם רעה תחת טובה: ⁵ זה הוא זה אשר ישתה אנני בו

CHAPTER 44

The Brothers' Last Trial (vv. 1–34)

Following their reception at Joseph’s house, the brothers, undoubtedly in high spirits, set out on their homeward journey. However, their ease of mind is soon shattered as Joseph employs his one last harrowing stratagem.

JOSEPH’S INSTRUCTIONS (vv. 1–5)

1. Then he instructed Presumably, these preparations take place during the night while the brothers sleep.

By generously supplying them with provisions in excess of what their money can buy, Joseph makes the brothers’ “ingratitude” appear all the greater when they are apprehended for alleged theft. The restoration of their money this time is puzzling since it plays no role in the accusation that is soon to be made against them. Ramban suggests that it was done by prior mutual agreement as compensation for the trouble and anguish the brothers had endured on their first visit.

2. goblet Hebrew *gavia*⁴ is probably a loan word from Egyptian *kḥḥ.w*, “libation vessel.” It appears in other contexts only in the sense of a container for wine larger than an ordinary cup and as a receptacle for oil in the menorah of the Tabernacle.¹ In the present instance, the goblet serves both as a drinking vessel and as a divining instrument (v. 5). 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 *keseḥ*, “silver, money,” is a key word, reiterated twenty times in the accounts of Joseph and his brothers in Egypt (chaps. 42–45). The brothers had sold Joseph into slavery for twenty pieces of silver (Gen. 37:28); now he harasses and tests them with silver.

3. the first light of morning This detail explains why Joseph is still at home when the brothers later return (v. 14).

the men . . . with their pack animals The brothers’ fears that they would be enslaved and their animals confiscated (43:18) are groundless—or so it seems.

4. the city The city is said to be situated “in the region of Goshen” (see Comment to 45:10).

repay good with evil Later, Joseph tells his brothers that God used their evil intentions to good end (50:20).

my master drinks and which he uses for divination. It was a wicked thing for you to do!”

⁶He overtook them and spoke those words to them. ⁷And they said to him, “Why does my lord say such things? Far be it from your servants to do anything of the kind! ⁸Here 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! ⁹Whichever of your servants it is found with shall die; the rest of us, moreover, shall become slaves to my lord.” ¹⁰He 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.”

וְהוּא נִחַשׁ וַיִּנְחַשׁ בּוֹ הַרְעֵתָם אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתָם: 6 וַיִּשְׁגֶּם וַיִּדְבֹר אֵלֵהֶם אֶת־הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה: 7 וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו לְמָה יִדְבֹר אֲדֹנָי בְּדְבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה חֲלִילָה לַעֲבֹדֶיךָ מַעֲשֹׂת בְּדְבַר הַזֶּה: 8 הֵן קָסָף אֲשֶׁר מָצְאָנוּ בְּפִי אִמְתַּחֲתֵינוּ הִשְׁיִבְנוּ אֵלֶיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וְאִיד נִגְנַב מִבַּיִת אֲדֹנָיךָ קָסָף אוֹ זָהָב: 9 אֲשֶׁר יִמְצָא אֹתוֹ מֵעַבְדֶיךָ וְמֵת וְגַם־אֲנַחְנוּ נִהְיֶה לְאֲדֹנָי לַעֲבָדִים: 10 וַיֹּאמֶר גַּם־עֲתָה כְּדְבָרְכֶם בְּנִי־הוּא אֲשֶׁר יִמְצָא אֹתוֹ יִהְיֶה־לִּי עֹבֵד וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ נְקִיִּם: 11 וַיִּמְהָרוּ וַיִּרְדּוּ אִישׁ אֶת־

5. The steward is not to make explicit mention of either the goblet or its theft. This deliberate vagueness is intended to fill the brothers with a sense of foreboding.

It is the very one . . . That is, the one they saw him using at dinner. If the goblet is found in their possession, the brothers certainly cannot claim that it is their own property.

he uses for divination It is not stated that Joseph actually believes in divination. He wants the brothers to think he does. The technique of divining by means of a goblet is well known from the ancient world. It took various forms: the use of water (hydromancy), oil (oleomancy), or wine (oenomancy). The practitioner professed to be able to interpret either the surface patterns formed when a few drops of one liquid were poured onto another or the movement of objects floating on or sinking in the fluid. The aim of the exercise was to determine the future, to locate the source of trouble, or to apportion blame or credits, as in 30:27. The legislation in Deuteronomy 18:10 outlawed divination in Israel.²

THE STEWARD'S ACCUSATION AND SEARCH (vv. 6–12)

8. *Here. . . . How then . . . ?* Hebrew *hen . . . ve-eikh*. This inference from a minor premise to a major one is known in rabbinic terminology as *kal va-homer*. This is the first of ten such instances of this type of reasoning in the Bible. They are listed in Genesis Rabba 92:7.

9. Undoubtedly, the spontaneous pronouncement of a death penalty for the thief and of slavery for the others is rhetorical and intended to be a convincing and categorical assertion of innocence. It is not clear whether these penalties reflect contemporary law (see Comment to Gen. 31:32). The formula “shall die” (Heb. *va-met*) has more of a judicial than an imprecatory ring (cf. Deut. 18:20; 19:12; 1 Kings 1:52). Ancient Near Eastern collections of laws display no uniformity in the case of theft. Hammurabi (cf. pars. 6–10) and the Middle Assyrian laws (cf. A, pars. 3,4) prescribe capital punishment or mutilation of the body for certain offenses of this kind. The codes of Lipit-Ishtar (par. 9) and of the kingdom of Eshnunna (pars. 40,49,50) appear to be much more lenient. Biblical law never legislates the death penalty for crimes against personal property. In the present instance, it is possible that the proposed punishments reflect Egyptian law, unknown to us from any other source. It is also likely that the theft of a sacred object entailed far more severe penalties than ordinary theft. Moreover, it is very possible that because the brothers are convinced of their innocence, they propose a harsher punishment for themselves than the law actually requires.

the rest of us The brothers accept the principle of collective responsibility.

10. The opening words of the steward’s response—literally “also now according to your words so it is”—are unclear. They could mean, “The penalties you invoke are indeed the law, but I shall be lenient.” However, this interpretation is countered by Joseph’s apparent rejection of the

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

¹⁴When Judah and his brothers reentered the house of Joseph, who was still there, they threw themselves on the ground before him. ¹⁵Joseph said to them, "What is this deed that you have done? Do you not know that a man like me practices divination?" ¹⁶Judah 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." ¹⁷But he

אִמְתַּחֲתוּ אֶרְצָה וַיִּפְתְּחוּ אִישׁ אֶמְתַּחֲתוֹ: ¹² וַיַּחְפֹּשׂ בְּגִדוֹל הַחֵל וּבְקִטְוֹן כְּלָה וַיִּמְצָא הַגְּבִיעַ בְּאֶמְתַּחֲת בְּנִימִן: ¹³ וַיִּקְרְעוּ שְׂמֹלֹתָם וַיַּעֲמֹס אִישׁ עַל־חֲמֹלוֹ וַיִּשְׁבוּ הָעִירָה: מַפְטִיר ¹⁴ וַיָּבֹא יְהוּדָה וְאָחָיו בֵּיתָה יוֹסֵף וְהוּא עוֹדְנוּ שָׁם וַיִּפְּלוּ לְפָנָיו אֶרְצָה: [מַפְטִיר לַסְּפָרַדִּים] ¹⁵ וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם יוֹסֵף מַה־הַמַּעֲשֶׂה הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר עֲשִׂיתֶם הֲלוֹא יָדַעְתֶּם כִּי־נִחַשׁ יִנְחַשׁ אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר כְּמִנִּי: ¹⁶ וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוּדָה מַה־נֹּאמַר לְאֹדְנִי מַה־נִּדְבַר וּמַה־נִּצְטַדֵּק הָאֱלֹהִים מִצָּא אֶת־עֵינָיו עִבְדֶּיךָ הַנְּנוּ עִבְדִּים לְאֹדְנִי גַם־אֲנַחְנוּ גַם אֲשֶׁר־נִמְצָא הַגְּבִיעַ בְּיָדוֹ: ¹⁷ וַיֹּאמֶר חֲלִילָה לִּי מִעֲשׂוֹת זֹאת הָאִישׁ

unfairness of collective responsibility in verse 17. The steward might also mean, "I accept the logic of your argument to the effect that you are generally honest."³

shall go free Hebrew *nekiyyim*, a legal term for "cleared of offense or obligation."

11. Their haste to unload is a demonstration of innocence as well as an attempt to dispose of the entire business as expeditiously as possible.

12. The steward adroitly manipulates the situation. One can easily imagine the rising self-confidence of the brothers after each successive search yielded nothing.

THE RETURN TO JOSEPH (vv. 13–17)

13. *they rent their clothes* The horror of their predicament leaves them speechless. They can only do what they caused their father to do years before (37:34).⁴

14. *Judah* He has personally gone surety for Benjamin, so he naturally takes the lead.

Joseph . . . was still there He has not yet left the house for his place of work because it is still very early in the morning (v. 3). Joseph's presence, therefore, does not raise any suspicion of trickery.

on the ground This unique addition to the usual phrase expresses their abject state of utter despair.

15. Feigning anger, Joseph addresses them collectively, implying that they are all involved in the theft. His "leniency," soon to be displayed (v. 17), thus appears to be all the more generous.

practices divination See Comment to verse 5. Since no mention is made of the goblet, it may be assumed that Joseph simply boasts of his ability to detect a thief by divination.⁵

16. *has uncovered the crime* Judah may deliberately be making a false collective confession of guilt regarding the theft of the goblet in order to save Benjamin from being singled out for punishment. It is also possible that, as on their first journey to Egypt (42:21f.), the confrontation with great danger releases their long-suppressed, but ever-festering, feelings of guilt concerning their crime against Joseph.⁶ Alternatively, Judah's words may merely express the simplistic ancient belief that suffering was divine punishment for sin, even if the particular sin could not be identified, so that, in effect, this is a resignation to misfortune.

slaves Naturally, Judah does not refer to his earlier rash statement regarding the death penalty (v. 9).

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.”

אֲשֶׁר נִמְצָא הַגִּבְעָה בְּיָדוֹ הוּא יִהְיֶה-לִּי עֶבֶד
וְאַתֶּם עָלוּ לְשָׁלוֹם אֶל-אֲבֹתֵיכֶם: פ

VA-YIGGASH

¹⁸Then Judah went up to him and said, “Please, my lord, let your servant appeal to my lord, and do not be impatient with your servant, you who are the equal of Pharaoh. ¹⁹My lord asked his servants, ‘Have you a father or another brother?’ ²⁰We told my lord, ‘We have an old father, and there is a child of his old age, the youngest; his full brother is dead, so that he alone is left of his mother, and his father dotes on him.’ ²¹Then you said to your servants, ‘Bring him down to me, that I may set eyes on him.’ ²²We said to my lord, ‘The boy cannot leave his father; if he were to leave him, his father would die.’ ²³But you said to your servants,

ויגש

18 וַיִּגֶשׁ אֵלָיו יְהוֹדָה וַיֹּאמֶר בִּי אֲדֹנָי יְדַבְרֵ-נָא
עֲבָדֶיךָ דָּבָר בְּאָזְנֵי אֲדֹנָי וְאַל-יַחַר אַפְּךָ בְּעַבְדֶּיךָ
כִּי כְמוֹךָ בְּפָרְעָה: 19 אֲדֹנָי שְׂאֵל אֶת-עַבְדֶּיךָ
לֵאמֹר הֲיֵשׁ-לָכֶם אָב אֹ-אָח: 20 וְנֹאמֶר אֶל-אֲדֹנָי
יִשְׁלַנּוּ אָב זָקֵן וְיָלֵד זָקֵנִים קָטָן וְאָחִיו מֵת וַיִּנְתֵּר
הוּא לְבֶדּוֹ לְאִמּוֹ וְאָבִיו אֶהְבּוֹ: 21 וְתֹאמְרוּ אֵל-
עַבְדֶּיךָ הוֹרְדֵהוּ אֵלָי וְאֲשִׁימָה עֵינַי עָלָיו:
22 וְנֹאמֶר אֶל-אֲדֹנָי לֹא-יִוָּכַל הַנְּעָר לְעֹזֵב אֶת-
אָבִיו וְעֹזֵב אֶת-אָבִיו וּמָת: 23 וְתֹאמְרוּ אֶל-עַבְדֶּיךָ

17. With an affectation of self-righteousness, Joseph applies his supreme and final test of their integrity. He confronts the brothers with a dilemma that involves agonizing decisions. They can save their own lives, but this would be disastrous to their father and would be at the expense of their loyalty to Benjamin. If the brothers stay with Benjamin, they cannot bring back food to their father and to their families, who will then die of starvation.

JUDAH'S SPEECH (vv. 18–34)

Va-Yiggash

The encounter between Joseph and his brothers has now reached its climactic moment. A personal appeal to the great man is Judah's last desperate resort. He pours out his heart in what is the longest speech in the Book of Genesis, although it could not have lasted more than five minutes. Divided into three parts, the address recapitulates recent events (vv. 18–29), stresses the adverse impact of Joseph's act upon their father (vv. 30–32), and culminates in a personal offer to take Benjamin's place as a slave (vv. 33–34). It makes no mention of the theft of the goblet or of the innocence or guilt of the accused. This shrewd but simple appeal to Joseph's sense of fairness and mercy attempts to invoke his humanity through repeated reference to the state of their aged father. It is also designed to impress Joseph with the speaker's noble self-sacrifice.

Judah's eloquence is effective because it is deferential yet dignified, spirited but not provocative, full of pathos and passion, yet restrained and transparently sincere.

18. *appeal to . . .* Literally “speak in the ears of . . .,” which is idiomatic for “have a hearing.”⁷

the equal of Pharaoh The phrase is not mere flattery but a subtle reminder of Joseph's power to grant a pardon by virtue of his exalted position.

20. *his full brother is dead* In 42:13, they had said, ambiguously referring to Joseph, that “one is no more.” Now Judah cites Jacob's words of 42:38. He obviously cannot tell the truth.

21. *I may set eyes on him* Elsewhere the Hebrew phrase *sim 'ayin 'al* means “to pay special attention to” (Jer. 39:12; 40:4) and may be further defined as to advantage (Jer. 24:6) or disadvantage of the one watched (Amos 9:4). Judah may be subtly calling Joseph's integrity and fair play into question. He had inferred from the request to bring Benjamin an assurance on the part of Joseph that no harm would befall the lad.

‘Unless your youngest brother comes down with you, do not let me see your faces.’²⁴ When we came back to your servant my father, we reported my lord’s words to him.

²⁵“Later our father said, ‘Go back and procure some food for us.’²⁶ We answered, ‘We cannot go down; only if our youngest brother is with us can we go down, for we may not show our faces to the man unless our youngest brother is with us.’²⁷ Your servant my father said to us, ‘As you know, my wife bore me two sons.²⁸ But one is gone from me, and I said: Alas, he was torn by a beast! And I have not seen him since.’²⁹ If you take this one from me, too, and he meets with disaster, you will send my white head down to Sheol in sorrow.’

³⁰“Now, if I come to your servant my father and the boy is not with us—since his own life is so bound up with his—³¹when he sees that the boy is not with us, he will die, and your servants will send the white head of your servant our father down to Sheol in grief.³² Now your servant has pledged himself for the boy to my father, saying, ‘If I do not bring him back to you, I shall stand guilty before my father forever.’³³ Therefore, please let your servant remain as a slave to my lord instead of the boy, and let the boy go back with his brothers.³⁴ For how can I go back to my father unless the boy is with me? Let me not be witness to the woe that would overtake my father!”

אם־לא ירד אחיכם הקטן אתכם לא תספון לראות פני: ²⁴ ויהי כי עלינו אל־עבדך אבי ונגד־לו את דברי אדני: ²⁵ ויאמר אבינו שבו שברו־לנו מעט־אכל: ²⁶ ונאמר לא נוכל לרדת אם־יש אחינו הקטן אתנו וירדנו כי־לא נוכל לראות פני האיש ואחינו הקטן איננו אתנו: ²⁷ ויאמר עבדך אבי אלנו אתם ידעתם כי שנים ילדה־לי אשתי: ²⁸ ויצא האחד מאתי ואמר אך טרף טרף ולא ראיתיו עד־הנה: ²⁹ ולקחתם גם־את־זה מעם פני וקרהו אסון והורדתם את־שיבתי ברעה שא־לה: ³⁰ ועתה בבאי אל־עבדך אבי והנער איננו אתנו ונפשו קשורה בנפשו: שני ³¹ והיה כראותו כי־אין הנער ומת והורידו עבדיך את־שיבת עבדך אבינו בגזן שא־לה: ³² כי עבדך ערב את־הנער מעם אבי לאמר אם־לא אביאנו אליך וחטאתי לאבי כל־הימים: ³³ ועתה ישב־נא עבדך תחת הנער עבד לאדני והנער יעל עם־אחיו: ³⁴ כי איך אעלה אל־אבי והנער איננו אתי פן אראה ברע אשר ימצא את־אבי:

22. *his father would die* Actually, the subject of the Hebrew verb *va-met* is ambiguous. It may be either Benjamin or the father.⁸ In light of verse 31, the latter is the more likely.

28. *and I said* That is, “I had to admit.” The succeeding phrase “And I have not seen him since” implies some lingering doubt as to whether he is really dead. For this reason, Hebrew *’akh* seems to mean “alas,” not “surely.”

31. *with us* An addition to the literal Hebrew required by the context. The same is found in the Septuagint, Samaritan, and Peshitta versions.

your servants will send . . . Judah probably means, “you will be responsible for his death.”

32. Judah must explain why he acts as the spokesman because Joseph knows that he is not the oldest brother (43:33).

33–34. The one who had been responsible for the sale of Joseph into slavery (37:26f.) now unwittingly offers to become the slave of his own victim! The story has come full circle, and the stage is set for the dramatic denouement, brought on by Judah’s noble gesture of self-sacrifice and the moving image of his father’s misery.

45 Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, “Have everyone withdraw from me!” So there was no one else about when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. ²His sobs were so loud that the Egyptians could hear, and so the news reached Pharaoh’s palace.

³Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph. Is my father still well?” But his brothers could not answer him, so dumfounded were they on account of him.

⁴Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Come forward to me.” And when they came forward, he said, “I am your brother Joseph, he whom you sold into Egypt. ⁵Now, do not be distressed or reproach yourselves because you sold me hither; it was to save life that God sent me ahead of you.

מ"ה וְלֹא־יָכַל יוֹסֵף לְהִתְאַפֵּק לְכָל הַנֹּצְבִים עִלָּיו וַיִּקְרָא הוֹצִיאוּ כָל־אִישׁ מֵעִלָּי וְלֹא־עָמַד אִישׁ אִתּוֹ בְּהִתְרוֹעֵעַ יוֹסֵף אֶל־אֶחָיו: ² וַיִּתֵּן אֶת־קוֹלוֹ בְּבָכָיו וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ מִצְרַיִם וַיִּשְׁמַע בַּיִת פַּרְעֹה: ³ וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף אֶל־אֶחָיו אֲנִי יוֹסֵף הָעוֹד אֲבִי חַי וְלֹא־יָכַלוּ אֶחָיו לָעֲנוֹת אִתּוֹ כִּי נִבְהָלוּ מִפְּנָיו: ⁴ וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף אֶל־אֶחָיו גִּשְׁוֹנָה אֵלַי וַיִּגָּשׁוּ וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנִי יוֹסֵף אֶחֱיֶיכֶם אֲשֶׁר־מָכַרְתֶּם אֹתִי מִצְרַיִמָּה: ⁵ וְעַתָּה אֶל־תִּעַצְבוּ וְאֶל־יִחַד בְּעֵינֵיכֶם כִּי־מָכַרְתֶּם אֹתִי הֲנֵה כִּי לְמַחְיָה שָׁלַחֲנִי אֱלֹהִים לְפָנֵיכֶם: ⁶ כִּי־זֶה שָׁנָתִים הָרַעַב בְּקָרֶב הָאָרֶץ

CHAPTER 45

The Reconciliation (vv. 1–28)

JOSEPH REVEALS HIS TRUE IDENTITY (vv. 1–3)

1. The brothers have repeatedly proved their integrity and family loyalty. Joseph can gain nothing more from his stratagems. By now the emotional tension is overwhelming. Twice before Joseph had broken down—when he overheard Reuben describe the agonies of his sale into slavery (42:24) and when he first set eyes on Benjamin (43:30f.). On this last occasion Joseph had succeeded in controlling himself, but he can no longer contain his pent-up feelings.

before all his attendants Literally, “before all who were standing by him,” that is, the great man’s entourage.

no one else about No outsider may share this intensely intimate, climactic moment of self-revelation and reconciliation. Besides, Joseph would not want the Egyptians to know that his own brothers had sold him into slavery.

2. *the news reached Pharaoh’s palace* Literally, “the house of Pharaoh heard.” The report was quickly bruited about so that it reached the court.

3. *I am Joseph. Is my father . . .* The statements follow in rapid succession with no pause between them. Judah could not have known it, but more than anything, it was the repeated mention of the aged father—no less than fourteen times—that shook Joseph and brought his self-restraint to an end. No wonder, then, that Joseph’s first thought is for the welfare of his father. True, he had already sought and obtained the information he wanted (43:27f.), yet the terrifying picture Judah has painted makes Joseph cry out in such a way that his words are more an exclamation than an inquiry. That is why there is no reply and Joseph does not press the point.

REASSURANCE (vv. 4–8)

4. *your brother Joseph, he whom you sold* At once a reassurance and a rebuke: I shall behave as a brother should even though you were unbrotherly.

5. *you sold . . . God sent* The brothers had indeed acted with evil intent; yet behind it all had been the hidden, guiding hand of Divine Providence investing the base deeds of men with

⁶It is now two years that there has been famine in the land, and there are still five years to come in which there shall be no yield from tilling. ⁷God has sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival on earth, and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance. ⁸So, it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh, lord of all his household, and ruler over the whole land of Egypt.

⁹“Now, hurry back to my father and say to him: Thus says your son Joseph, ‘God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me without delay. ¹⁰You will dwell in the region of Goshen, where you will be near me—you and your children and your grandchildren, your flocks and herds, and all that is yours. ¹¹There I will provide for you—for there are yet

ועוד חמש שנים אשר אין חריש וקציר:
 7 וישלחני אלהים לפניכם לשום לכם שארית
 בארץ ולהחיות לכם לפליטה גדלה: שלישי
 8 ועתה לאאתם שלחתם אתי הנה כי
 האלהים וישמני לאב לפרעה ולאדון לכל-
 ביתו ומשל בכל-ארץ מצרים: 9 מהרץ ועלו
 אל-אבי ואמרתם אליו כה אמר בנך יוסף שמני
 אלהים לאדון לכל-מצרים רדה אלי אל-תעמד:
 10 וישבת בארץ גשן והיית קרוב אלי אתה
 ובניך ובני בנך וצאנך ובקרך וכל-אשר-לך:
 11 וככלתי אתך שם כי-עוד חמש שנים רעב

meaning and benign purpose. Joseph reiterates this conviction to his brothers after his father dies (50:20).

to save life To be the instrument of your survival.

6. no yield from tilling Literally, “no plowing and harvesting,” a compound expression for agricultural activities.¹ Since the farmer would certainly till the soil, the phrase here means there will be no effective plowing, none that will produce a yield.

8. not you . . . but God For the third time, Joseph reiterates the true significance of the fateful vicissitudes of his life. He no longer accuses the brothers of having sold him but says they “sent” him, thereby substituting the beneficial result for their evil purpose.

father to Pharaoh No such title is known to us from ancient Egypt. The closest to it in Egyptian seems to be *it ntr*, “father of god,” in which “god” may refer to the king. But its precise usage is in dispute, it having been variously interpreted as referring to the clergy, or given to the king’s father-in-law, or belonging to the tutor of the crown prince. In several biblical passages “father” is used as a title of honor for a prophet, a king, or a high administrator.²

ruler Hebrew *moshel* is meant to remind us of the brothers’ reaction to Joseph’s dreams. They had scornfully asked, “Do you mean to rule over us?”³

INSTRUCTIONS TO THE FAMILY (vv. 9–13)

10. You will dwell Joseph clearly has in mind a thoroughgoing and long-term migration from Canaan to Egypt.

the region Hebrew *’erets* is used here in the sense of a defined “territory,” “a district” (see Comment to 34:2).

Goshen The name has not been identified as Egyptian and is most likely Semitic. It is probably connected with Hebrew *gush*, “a clod” (Job 7:5), referring to a type of soil. This element appears as a place-name in Gush-Halav (Giscala) in Upper Galilee. Another “region of Goshen” is a strip of land south of Hebron in the Land of Israel mentioned in Joshua 10:41 and 11:16. A hill city of the same name, situated in the southern extremity of Judah, southwest of Hebron, is listed in Joshua 15:51. The presence of such a name in Egypt accords with other Semitic place-names such as Succoth (Exod. 12:37), Migdol, and Baal-zephon (Josh. 14:11) in the same region, thus attesting to its early occupation by Semites.

Although no source defines the precise geographic location of Goshen, the cumulative effect of various pieces of evidence is to place it in the area of Wadi Tumeilāt, which stretches from the eastern

five years of famine to come—that you and your household and all that is yours may not suffer want.¹² You can see for yourselves, and my brother Benjamin for himself, that it is indeed I who am speaking to you.¹³ And you must tell my father everything about my high station in Egypt and all that you have seen; and bring my father here with all speed.”

¹⁴With that he embraced his brother Benjamin around the neck and wept, and Benjamin wept on his neck. ¹⁵He kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; only then were his brothers able to talk to him.

¹⁶The news reached Pharaoh’s palace: “Joseph’s brothers have come.” Pharaoh and his courtiers were pleased. ¹⁷And Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Say to your brothers, ‘Do as follows: load up your beasts and go at once to the land of Canaan. ¹⁸Take your father and your households and come

פְּנִיתוֹרֶשׁ אֶתְּךָ וּבִיתְךָ וְכָל-אֲשֶׁר-לְךָ: 12 וְהִנֵּה עֵינֵיכֶם רְאוֹת וְעֵינַי אֶחָי בְּנִימִן בִּי-פִי הַמְדַבֵּר אֲלֵיכֶם: 13 וְהִגַּדְתֶּם לְאָבִי אֶת-כָּל-כְּבוֹדִי בְּמִצְרַיִם וְאֵת כָּל-אֲשֶׁר רָאִיתֶם וּמַהֲרַתֶּם וְהוֹרַדְתֶּם אֶת-אָבִי הַהֵנָּה: 14 וַיִּפֹּל עַל-צוּאְרָיו בְּנִימֹן אֶחָיו וַיִּבְךְּ וּבְנִימֹן בָּכָה עַל-צוּאְרָיו: 15 וַיִּנָּשֶׁק לְכָל-אֶחָיו וַיִּבְךְּ עֲלֵיהֶם וְאֶחָד מֵהֶם לֹן דִּבְּרוּ אֶחָיו אִתּוֹ: 16 וְהִקְל נִשְׁמָע בֵּית פַּרְעֹה לֵאמֹר בָּאוּ אֶחָי יוֹסֵף וַיִּטַּב בְּעֵינַי פַּרְעֹה וּבְעֵינַי עֲבָדָיו: 17 וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה אֶל-יוֹסֵף אֲמַר אֶל-אֶחְוֵיךָ זֹאת עֲשׂוּ טַעֲנוּ אֶת-בְּעִירְכֶם וּלְכוּ-בָאוּ אֶרְצָה כְּנָעַן: 18 וּקְחוּ אֶת-אֲבִיכֶם וְאֶת-בְּתִילְכֶם וּבָאוּ אֵלַי וְאֶתְנֶנָּה לָכֶם אֶת-טוֹב אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וְאֶכְלוּ

arm of the Nile to the Great Bitter Lake. Egyptian texts confirm the presence of Semites and other Asians in the northeastern part of the country both at the end of the Sixth Dynasty (ca. 2250 B.C.E.) and about 1700 B.C.E. in the wake of the Hyksos invasion. Exodus 12:38 refers to a “mixed multitude,” that is, foreign tribes, dwelling in the area of Israelite settlement.

Goshen is blessed with excellent grazing facilities (Gen. 46:32–34; 47:6,11), and it is known that the Nile Delta was the center of cattle breeding. The natural route from Asia to Egypt emerges from Wadi Tumeilāt, and Joseph traveled to Goshen to greet his father, who arrived from Canaan (46:29). Thus it could not have been too distant from the Egyptian frontier. The route of the Exodus from Goshen, where the Israelites were still living hundreds of years later (Exod. 8:18), also shows that it could not have been too far from the border (Exod. 12:37; 13:17f.). In addition, Goshen is said to have been in the vicinity of Joseph’s residence (Gen. 45:10) and also not too far from the royal palace (47:1f.). This is possible only if the capital was situated in the Nile Delta region at this time.

11. for there are yet five years of famine This parenthetical note is inserted in order to overcome Jacob’s anticipated resistance to a massive migration from Canaan.

12. This sentence is not part of the message to the father but is directed at the brothers.

I who am speaking Face-to-face, in your own language, without an interpreter.

13. all that you have seen That is, your knowledge of my situation is not derived from rumor but is firsthand.

THE FINAL GESTURE (vv. 14–15)

So far the brothers have not uttered a word. It is only after this emotional embrace that their consternation is overcome. They are now able to communicate with Joseph, something they were unable to do when he lived among them as a boy (Gen. 37:4).

PHARAOH’S INVITATION (vv. 16–20)

16. The point made in verse 2, and interrupted by the details of the denouement, is now resumed and expanded.

17. Pharaoh said Joseph’s invitation to his family to settle in Egypt is now endorsed by the king himself.

to me; I will give you the best of the land of Egypt and you shall live off the fat of the land.’¹⁹ And you are bidden [to add], ‘Do as follows: take from the land of Egypt wagons for your children and your wives, and bring your father here.²⁰ And never mind your belongings, for the best of all the land of Egypt shall be yours.’”

²¹The sons of Israel did so; Joseph gave them wagons as Pharaoh had commanded, and he supplied them with provisions for the journey. ²²To each of them, moreover, he gave a change of clothing; but to Benjamin he gave three hundred pieces of silver and several changes of clothing. ²³And to his father he sent the following: ten he-asses laden with the best things of Egypt, and ten she-asses laden with grain, bread, and provisions for his father on the journey. ²⁴As he sent his brothers off on their way, he told them, “Do not be quarrelsome on the way.”

²⁵They went up from Egypt and came to their father Jacob in the land of Canaan. ²⁶And they told him, “Joseph is still alive; yes, he is ruler over the whole land of Egypt.” His heart went numb, for he did not believe them. ²⁷But when they recounted all that Joseph had said to them, and

אֶת-חֵלֶב הָאָרֶץ: רביעי 19 וְאֶתָּה צְנִיטָהּ זֹאת
 עֲשׂוּ קְחוּ-לְכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם עֲגָלוֹת לְטַפְכֶם
 וּלְנִשְׁיֵיכֶם וּנְשֵׂאתֶם אֶת-אֲבִיכֶם וּבְאֵתֶם:
 20 וְעִינְכֶם אַל-תַּחֲסוּ עַל-כְּלֵיכֶם כִּי-טוֹב בְּלִ-אֶרֶץ
 מִצְרַיִם לְכֶם הוּא: 21 וַיַּעֲשׂוּ-כֵן בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיָּתִן
 לָהֶם יוֹסֵף עֲגָלוֹת עַל-פִּי פִרְעֹה וַיִּתֵּן לָהֶם צִדָּה
 לְהַרְדָּה: 22 לְכֹלֶם נָתַן לְאִישׁ חֲלָפוֹת שְׂמֹלֹת
 וּלְבִנְיָמִן נָתַן שְׁלֹשׁ מֵאוֹת כֶּסֶף וְחֲמֵשׁ חֲלָפֹת
 שְׂמֹלֹת: 23 וּלְאֲבִיו שָׁלַח כְּזֹאת עֶשְׂרֵה חֲמֹרִים
 נְשֵׂאִים מְטוֹב מִצְרַיִם וְעֶשֶׂר אֲתֹנֹת נְשֵׂאת בָר
 וְלֶחֶם וּמְזוֹן לְאֲבִיו לְהַרְדָּה: 24 וַיִּשְׁלַח אֶת-אֶחָיו
 וַיֵּלְכוּ וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֱלֹהֵיהֶם אֱלֹהֵיהֶם בְּהַרְדָּה: 25 וַיַּעֲלוּ
 מִמִּצְרַיִם וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן אֶל-יַעֲקֹב אֲבִיהֶם:
 26 וַיַּגִּדוּ לוֹ לֵאמֹר עוֹד יוֹסֵף חַי וְכִי-הוּא מִשַּׁל
 בְּכָל-אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וַיִּפְגַּע לְבֹו כִּי לֹא-הֵאֱמִין לָהֶם:
 27 וַיִּדְבְּרוּ אֵלָיו אֶת כָּל-דִּבְרֵי יוֹסֵף אֲשֶׁר-דִּבֶּר
 אֲלֵהֶם וַיֵּרָא אֶת-הָעֲגָלוֹת אֲשֶׁר-שָׁלַח יוֹסֵף

load up The stem *ta'an* here is unique. Its meaning is suggested by the context and by its Aramaic usage.

beasts Hebrew *be'ir* is a collective.⁴

18. the fat of the land The choicest products of the soil.⁵ The phrase may imply recognition that seminomads often engaged in agriculture (cf. 26:12).

19. you are bidden [to add] The order is given to Joseph to relay to his brothers. The previous instructions could be carried out with no outside assistance. This one, however, requires official authorization, the effect of which is to accord Jacob's clan the special status of ward of the king.

20. never mind Do not begrudge having to leave behind personal possessions that will cause you inconvenience if you bring them along; do not allow such considerations to delay you.

RETURN TO JACOB (vv. 21–28)

22. a change of clothing Hebrew *halifot* is specifically employed for a gift of clothing, as a valued prize or as a token of affection or honor.⁶ The consistent use of the plural form may signify a set of clothing comprising more than one article. Since an article of apparel had featured prominently in the tale of hostility between Joseph and his brothers, it is only fitting that their reconciliation should be marked by a gift of apparel.

several Literally, “five” (see Comments to 41:34; 43:34).

24. quarrelsome The Hebrew stem *r-g-z*, which means “trembling,” carries overtones of agitation, deep concern, or rage. Hence, some understand the text to mean: Have no fear for your safety on the journey to Canaan and back. The present rendering understands the text to mean: Do not engage in mutual recrimination.⁷

when he saw the wagons that Joseph had said to them, and him, the spirit of their father Jacob revived. ²⁸“Enough!” said Israel. “My son Joseph is still alive! I must go and see him before I die.”

לִשְׂאֵת אֶת־וַתְּחִי רוּחַ יַעֲקֹב אֲבִיהֶם: חֲמִישִׁי
 28 וַיֹּאמֶר יִשְׂרָאֵל רַב עֹד־יֹסֵף בְּנֵי חַי אֵלַיכֶּה
 וְאֶרְאֶנּוּ בְּטָרִם אָמוֹת:

46 So Israel set out with all that was his, and he came to Beer-sheba, where he offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac. ²God called to Israel in a vision by night: “Jacob! Jacob!” He answered, “Here.” ³And He said, “I am

מ' וַיֵּסַע יִשְׂרָאֵל וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר־לוֹ וַיָּבֹא בְּאֶרֶז
 שֶׁבַע וַיַּזְבַּח זְבָחִים לֵאלֹהֵי אָבִיו יַצְחָק: 2 וַיֹּאמֶר
 אֱלֹהִים לְיִשְׂרָאֵל בְּמַרְאֵת הַלַּיְלָה וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב
 יַעֲקֹב וַיֹּאמֶר הִנְנִי: 3 וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנֹכִי הָאֵל אֱלֹהֵי

28. go and see him Jacob does not mention the famine and is not concerned with Joseph’s power and glory. His only desire is to visit his son, not to settle in Egypt.⁸

CHAPTER 46

The Migration to Egypt (46:1–47:10)

With this narrative, the patriarchal period in the history of Israel comes to an end.

Jacob’s descent to Egypt appears at first to be merely a family visit. Yet this visit is presented as being fraught with national significance. It is a summing up of the past as well as a new beginning. Famine drove Abraham to Egypt (12:10); now famine impels his grandson in the same direction. Abraham’s career opened with a divine revelation; Jacob’s closes with a similar experience. Jacob’s odyssey began at Beer-sheba (28:10); it fittingly concludes with a revelation at the same place. The divine Voice will not be heard again until the advent of Moses.

JACOB AT BEER-SHEBA (vv. 1–4)

1. Israel set out Presumably from Hebron, which was his last specified location (37:14).

Beer-sheba An important north-south road linked Hebron to this city, a distance of about 25 miles (40 km.). Jacob’s reasons for stopping at Beer-sheba in order to worship are not given. The arduous and exhausting journey to Egypt, especially for one of such advanced age, would be an understandable cause of great anxiety. But verse 3 shows that Jacob’s doubt and hesitation go much deeper. Is the patriarch distressed at having to leave the promised land? Is he afraid of dying on alien soil? Are his fears intensified by the memory that his father had been expressly forbidden by God to go to Egypt (26:2)? Perhaps he is troubled by the recollection of the divine announcement to Abraham that his descendants were destined to be enslaved and oppressed as strangers in a foreign land (15:13). At any rate, Jacob seems to experience a sudden reluctance to continue the journey. According to a tradition recorded in the Book of Jubilees 44:3, Jacob decided to invite Joseph to come and visit him in Canaan.

offered sacrifices No mention is made of an altar. It must be taken for granted that he uses the one that Isaac had once constructed at this place (26:25). The sacrifices here are termed *zevachim*, a type mentioned in Genesis only in connection with Jacob (cf. 31:54). It was distinguished from the “burnt offering” (cf. 8:20; 22:2) in that only a small portion was actually burned on the altar, while the major part of the slaughtered animal was eaten at a festive family or communal meal. Hence, it is probable that this sacrificial rite was an offering of thanks to God that Joseph was still alive.

the God of his father Isaac On the formula, see Comment to 26:24. Isaac is exclusively invoked here because he built the altar at Beer-sheba and received a revelation there (26:24–25).

2. called Hebrew *va-yo’mer* is used here rather than the more appropriate *va-yera’*, “appeared,” because the revelation is wholly verbal and without any visual aspect and because, being

God, the God of your father. Fear not to go down to Egypt, for I will make you there into a great nation. ⁴I Myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I Myself will also bring you back; and Joseph's hand shall close your eyes.”

⁵So Jacob set out from Beer-sheba. The sons of Israel put their father Jacob and their children and their wives in the wagons that Pharaoh had sent to transport him; ⁶and they took along their livestock and the wealth that they had amassed in the land of Canaan. Thus Jacob and all his off-

אָבִיךָ אֱלֹהֵי־אֲבִיךָ מִצְרַיִם מִרְדָּה מִצְרַיִם כִּי־לָגוּ גְדוֹל
אֲשִׁימְךָ שָׁם: 4 אֲנִי אֶרְדָּ אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וְאֲנִי
אֶעֱלֶךָ גַּם־עֲלֶיךָ וְיֹסֵף יָשִׁית יָדוֹ עַל־עֵינֶיךָ:
5 וַיִּקַּם יַעֲקֹב מִבְּעָר שֶׁבַע וַיֵּשְׂאוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל
אֶת־יַעֲקֹב אֲבִיהֶם וְאֶת־טַפָּם וְאֶת־נְשֵׂיהֶם
בַּעֲגָלוֹת אֲשֶׁר־שָׁלַח פַּרְעֹה לְשִׂאת אֹתוֹ: 6 וַיִּקְחוּ
אֶת־מִקְנֵיהֶם וְאֶת־כֹּשֶׁם אֲשֶׁר רָכְשׁוּ בְּאֶרֶץ
כְּנָעַן וַיָּבֹאוּ מִצְרַיִם יַעֲקֹב וְכָל־זֶרְעוֹ אִתּוֹ: 7 בָּנָיו

the last revelation to the patriarchs, the word forges a link with the very first revelation to Abraham (12:1).

a vision Hebrew *mar'ot*, a plural form found elsewhere only in Ezekiel, where it indicates a multiplicity of visions. Here, however, the plural seems to express the intensity of the experience. The term *mar'ah*, although rendered “vision,” may also be used, as here, for a purely oral divine communication.¹

by night The most frequent time of divine communication to the patriarchs.²

3. *I am God . . .* On this formula, see Comments to 15:7 and 26:24.

the God of your father This echoes verse 1 and suggests that when he performed the sacrifice Jacob recited some invocation that mentioned Isaac by name.

Fear not The same reassurance was given to Abraham and to Isaac; it will be given to Moses as well.³ It is never preceded by a statement revealing their disquiet. The idea is that man's inner anxieties and fears—although unexpressed—are known to God.

a great nation Another point of contact with the first revelation to the patriarchs (12:2). Now it is explained that the divine promise of peoplehood is to be fulfilled in Egypt. Thus the patriarch is indirectly but unmistakably told that the migration to Egypt is to be total and of long duration. A family visit is thereby transformed into an event of national significance with its pre-ordained place in God's scheme of history.

4. *I Myself will go down with you* Meaning, I shall protect you both on the journey and in Egypt. The God of the patriarchs knows no territorial limitations. He was with Jacob in Mesopotamia (31:13) and in Canaan (35:3) and now will display His providence in Egypt.

will also bring you back The promise is both personal and national. Jacob himself will be brought back for burial in the grave of his fathers (47:29f.; 50:5–13); his offspring will return to possess the Land of Israel.

Joseph's hand shall close your eyes Literally, “Joseph shall place his hand on your eyes,” understood as a reference to the custom that the eldest son or nearest relative would gently close the eyes of the deceased. Such has remained time-honored Jewish practice to the present day.⁴ The promise, then, is that Joseph will outlive Jacob and will be present at the moment of his death. The promise was indeed fulfilled, as told in 49:33 and 50:1.

DEPARTURE FOR EGYPT (vv. 5–7)

5. *set out* Hebrew *va-yakom* usually introduces an action that is then specified (cf. 21:32; 24:10); here it signifies firm resolve. The action is performed by his sons because Jacob is too weak.

in the wagons Apparently, the patriarch has refrained from using them until his doubts have been dispelled.

6–7. The strong emphasis on the all-inclusive nature of the migration is meant to draw

spring with him came to Egypt: ⁷he brought with him to Egypt his sons and grandsons, his daughters and granddaughters—all his offspring.

⁸These are the names of the Israelites, Jacob and his descendants, who came to Egypt.

Jacob's first-born Reuben; ⁹Reuben's sons: Enoch, Pallu, Hezron, and Carmi. ¹⁰Simeon's sons: Jemuel, Jamin, Ohad, Jachin, Zohar, and Saul the son of a Canaanite woman. ¹¹Levi's sons: Gershon, Kohath, and Merari. ¹²Judah's sons: Er, Onan, Shelah, Perez, and Zerah—but Er and Onan had died in the land of Canaan; and Perez's sons were Hezron and Hamul. ¹³Issachar's sons: Tola,

ובני בניו אתו בנותיו ובנות בניו וכל־זרעו הביא אתו מצרימה: ⁸ ואלה שמות בני ישראל הבאים מצרימה יעקב ובניו בכר יעקב ראובן: ⁹ ובני ראובן חנוך ופלוא וחצרון וכרמי: ¹⁰ ובני שמעון ימואל וימין ואהר ויבין ויגחר ושאול בן־הכנענית: ¹¹ ובני לוי גרשון קהת ומררי: ¹² ובני יהודה ער ואונן ושלה ופרץ וזרח וימת ער ואונן בארץ כנען ויהיו בני־פרץ חצרון וחמול: ¹³ ובני יששכר תולע ופוז ויוב ושמרון:

attention, once again, to the national significance of the event. This passage provides a smooth transition to the next section.

7. *daughters* That is, his daughter Dinah, his daughters-in-law, and his granddaughters.⁵

THE GENEALOGY OF JACOB (vv. 8–27)

At this point the narrative is interrupted by a census of the Israelite clans. This document bears its own distinctive literary form. Those included are listed according to the matriarch with whom they are associated. The order is: Leah and her maidservant Zilpah, Rachel and her maidservant Bilhah. Coincidentally, this parallels the descending order of the number of progeny. Each of the four groupings concludes with a formula that contains the initial statement, “These are the sons/descendants of . . .,” the name of the matriarch, and a numerical summation (vv. 15,18,22,25).

The genealogical lists bristle with difficulties that derive from apparent inconsistencies contained within the information given and from a comparison with parallel lists found elsewhere in the Hebrew text as well as in the Septuagint version. On many of these issues, see Excursus 30.

8. *These are the names* A standard introductory formula.⁶

the Israelites The children of the patriarch Israel have imperceptibly become “the Israelites,” a national entity. The promise of verse 3 is already being fulfilled in embryo.

first-born See Comment to 35:22f.

9. The four sons of Reuben listed here are identical to those recorded in the parallel genealogies of Exodus 6:14, Numbers 26:5–6, and 1 Chronicles 5:3.

10. *Jemuel* So Exodus 6:15. However, in Numbers 26:12 and 1 Chronicles 4:24 the name is listed as Nemuel. The difference may be a matter of dialect.

Ohad This name is missing from Numbers 26:12 and 1 Chronicles 4:24, perhaps due to the fact that the clan disappeared in later times.

Zohar So Exodus 6:15. However, in Numbers 26:13 and 1 Chronicles 4:24 it is replaced by Zerah. Both names mean “shining, brightness.”

Saul the son of a Canaanite So in Exodus 6:15 but not in Numbers 26:13 or 1 Chronicles 4:24. The exceptional notice reflects the disfavor in which tribal intermarriage with Canaanites was held.⁷

12. *Er, Onan* Compare 38:3–10.

died in the land of Canaan So Numbers 26:19.

Perez's sons were . . . The Hebrew formula *va-yihyu benei* does not appear again in these genealogies. The change in terminology indicates that the two sons are mentioned even though they

Puvah, Job, and Shimron. ¹⁴Zebulun's sons: Sered, Elon, and Jahleel. ¹⁵Those were the sons whom Leah bore to Jacob in Paddan-aram, in addition to his daughter Dinah. Persons in all, male and female: 33.

¹⁶Gad's sons: Ziphion, Haggi, Shuni, Ezbon, Eri, Arodi, and Areli. ¹⁷Asher's sons: Imnah, Ishvah, Ishvi, and Beriah, and their sister Serah. Beriah's sons: Heber and Malchiel. ¹⁸These were the descendants of Zilpah, whom Laban had given to his daughter Leah. These she bore to Jacob—16 persons.

¹⁹The sons of Jacob's wife Rachel were Joseph and Benjamin. ²⁰To Joseph were born in the land of Egypt Manasseh and Ephraim, whom Asenath daughter of Poti-phaera priest of On bore to him. ²¹Benjamin's sons: Bela, Becher,

14 ובני זבולון סֶרֶד וְאֵלֹן וַיְחִלְאֵל: 15 אֵלֶּה בְנֵי לֵאָה אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה לַיַּעֲקֹב בְּפַדְן אָרָם וְאֵת דִּינָה בְתוּלָה כָּל-נַפְשׁ בְּנָיו וּבְנוֹתָיו שְׁלֹשִׁים וּשְׁלֹשׁ: 16 וּבְנֵי גָד צִפְיוֹן וְחָגִי שׁוּנִי וְאַצְבֹּן עֲרִי וְאַרְוֵדִי וְאַרְאֵלִי: 17 וּבְנֵי אֲשֶׁר יִמְנָה וַיְשׁוּהָ וַיְשׁוּהָ וּבְרִיעָה וְשֶׁרָח אֶחָתָם וּבְנֵי בְרִיעָה חֶבֶר וּמַלְכִּיֵּאל: 18 אֵלֶּה בְנֵי זִלְפָּה אֲשֶׁר-נָתַן לָבָן לְלֵאָה בְתוּלָה וַתֵּלֶד אֶת-אֵלֶּה לַיַּעֲקֹב שֵׁשׁ עֶשְׂרֵה נַפְשׁ: 19 בְּנֵי רָחֵל אֵשֶׁת יַעֲקֹב יוֹסֵף וּבִנְיָמִן: 20 וַיּוֹלֶד לְיוֹסֵף בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה-לוֹ אֲסֵנַת בַּת-פְּוֹטִי פְּרַע כֹּהֵן אֵן אֶת-מְנַשֶּׁה וְאֶת-אֶפְרַיִם: 21 וּבְנֵי

could not possibly have been born at the time of the migration to Egypt (see Comment to 38:1). Judah sired five clans in all. Since two died out in Canaan, two of the second generation are listed to complete the five to be credited to Judah. Only Perez's sons are named because his was the most important of the clans: David was his descendant.⁸

13. Puvah In 1 Chronicles 7:1 he is called Puah. Judges 10:1 mentions a judge, “Tola son of Puah,” also of the tribe of Issachar.

Job The Septuagint and Samaritan texts read here Jashub, as in Numbers 26:24 and 1 Chronicles 7:1.

15. The sum total of the progeny of Leah listed here is indeed thirty-three. However, this computation includes Er and Onan, who died in Canaan, as well as Hezron and Hamul, who were certainly born in Egypt (see Comment to 38:1), and it excludes Dinah. But the phrase “male and female” (lit. “his sons and daughters”) requires her to be included. Accordingly, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, and Radak omit Er and Onan and reckon in Dinah and Jacob. This would make Leah's progeny thirty-two in all. The coincidental advantage of this is that Leah and Rachel would each have twice the number of descendants credited to their respective maidservants. Still, the text clearly refers to the children of Leah and cannot encompass Jacob within that total. Although not included in the computation, Dinah is mentioned because of the narrative about her in Genesis 34.

16. Gad He is seventh in the list of sons; the numerical value of the letters of his name is seven, and he has seven descendants.

Ziphion In Numbers 26:15 he appears as Zephon.

Ezbon In Numbers 26:16 the fourth son is Ozni.

17. Ishvah So 1 Chronicles 7:30; he is omitted from the list in Numbers 26:44.

their sister Serah She is also specified in Numbers 26:46 and 1 Chronicles 7:30. It is inconceivable that Jacob's twelve sons should have had fifty-three sons in all and only one daughter. In light of the general biblical tendency to omit women from the genealogies, there must be some extraordinary reason for mentioning her in this particular one, although not a hint of it is given in the text. A similar notice about a sister is found in 4:22 (see Comment) and 36:22 (cf. 28:9; 33:3).

18. The sixteen descendants of Zilpah consist of two sons, eleven grandsons, one granddaughter, and two great-grandsons.

19. The sons of Jacob's wife Rachel Of the four mothers, only Rachel is called “wife.” This is because she is listed after a concubine. The title thus affirms Rachel's superior status.⁹

20. Manasseh and Ephraim See Comment to 41:50.

Ashbel, Gera, Naaman, Ehi, Rosh, Muppim, Huppim, and Ard. ²²These were the descendants of Rachel who were born to Jacob—14 persons in all.

²³Dan's son: Hushim. ²⁴Naphtali's sons: Jahzeel, Guni, Jezer, and Shillem. ²⁵These were the descendants of Bilhah, whom Laban had given to his daughter Rachel. These she bore to Jacob—7 persons in all.

²⁶All the persons belonging to Jacob who came to Egypt—his own issue, aside from the wives of Jacob's sons—all these persons numbered 66. ²⁷And Joseph's sons

בְּנֵי־מִן בְּלַע וְכֹכַר וְאַשְׁבֵּל גְּרָא וְנַעֲמָן אֶתִּי וְרֵאֵשׁ
מַפִּים וְחַפִּים וְאַרְדֵּי: ²² אֵלֶּה בְּנֵי רַחֵל אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה
לְיַעֲקֹב כָּל־נַפְשׁ אַרְבַּעַה עָשָׂר: ²³ וּבְנֵי־דָן
חֲשִׁים: ²⁴ וּבְנֵי נַפְתָּלִי יַחְצֵאל וְגוּנִי וְיֶזֶר וְשִׁלֵּם:
²⁵ אֵלֶּה בְּנֵי בִלְהָה אֲשֶׁר־נָתַן לָבָן לְרַחֵל בְּתוּ
וְתָלַד אֶת־אֵלֶּה לְיַעֲקֹב כָּל־נַפְשׁ שִׁבְעָה: ²⁶ כָּל־
הַנַּפְשׁ הַבָּאָה לְיַעֲקֹב מִצְרַיִם יָצְאֵי יָרְכוּ מִלִּבָּד
נָשִׂי בְנֵי־יַעֲקֹב כָּל־נַפְשׁ שְׁשִׁים וְשֵׁשׁ: ²⁷ וּבְנֵי

21. The genealogy of Benjamin presents special problems. Ten sons are listed here, whereas Numbers 26:38–40 records five sons (and two grandsons), 1 Chronicles 7:6 has three sons, and 1 Chronicles 8:1ff. has five sons. Moreover, the names and the order of seniority differ in the various lists. Most likely, the divergences reflect different periods in biblical history as well as variant textual and historical traditions.

Becher He is not mentioned in Numbers 26:38–40 or in 1 Chronicles 8:1. According to Numbers 26:35, the clan of Becherites was associated with Ephraim. The name appears as that of a Benjaminite in 2 Samuel 20:1.

Ashbel He is the second son in Numbers 26:38 and in 1 Chronicles 8:1.

Gera He appears neither in Numbers 26 nor in 1 Chronicles 7. According to the Septuagint here and to 1 Chronicles 8:3, he was the son of Bela. All other bearers of the name Gera are Benjaminites.¹⁰

Naaman He does not appear in 1 Chronicles 7, but the Septuagint in this passage, in Numbers 26:40, and in 1 Chronicles 8:4 makes him Bela's son.

Ehi Though omitted in 1 Chronicles 7, he is probably to be identified with Ahiram, Benjamin's third son according to Numbers 26:38. In 1 Chronicles 8:1 Aharah occupies this place.

Rosh He is Bela's son in the Septuagint list but appears in none of the parallel lists.

Muppim He is Bela's son in the Septuagint. This form of the name occurs nowhere else. In Numbers 26:39 Shephupham is Benjamin's fourth son, and Shephuphan is the eighth son of Bela in 1 Chronicles 8:5.

Huppim The Septuagint omits him. In Numbers 26:39 Benjamin's fifth son is called Hupham.

Ard In the Septuagint he is the son of Gera, while in Numbers 26:40 he is listed as Bela's son. Addar is a son of Bela in 1 Chronicles 8:3.

23. **Dan's son** The Hebrew reads *benei*, "sons," and the incongruity of a plural with a single name has been variously explained. An early tradition—in Jubilees 44:28f.—gives Dan originally five sons; four died and their names were omitted from the list. This explanation is accepted by Ibn Ezra and Hizkuni. Another tradition records a different Hebrew text: *ben*, "son," found in the Torah copy of R. Meir (Gen. R. 94:8). The most convincing suggestion is that the plural simply follows the stereotyped formulaic pattern. This is intimated in Bava Batra 143b and is supported by the analogy of Numbers 26:8, 42f., and 1 Chronicles 1:41 and 2:8.

Hushim In Numbers 26:42 he is called Shuham, an inversion of the consonants.

24. The same list is given in Numbers 26:48f. and 1 Chronicles 7:13, except that in the latter source Jahzeel appears as Jahziel and Shillem as Shallum.

26. **his own issue** Literally, "that came out of his loin."¹¹ While the loins are the seat of procreative power in the Bible, it is possible that the word in the singular here is a euphemism for the reproductive organ. See Comment to 24:2.

who were born to him in Egypt were two in number. Thus the total of Jacob’s household who came to Egypt was 70 persons.

²⁸He had sent Judah ahead of him to Joseph, to point the way before him to Goshen. So when they came to the region of Goshen, ²⁹Joseph ordered his chariot and went to Goshen to meet his father Israel; he presented himself to him and, embracing him around the neck, he wept on his neck a good while. ³⁰Then Israel said to Joseph, “Now I can die, having seen for myself that you are still alive.”

³¹Then Joseph said to his brothers and to his father’s household, “I will go up and tell the news to Pharaoh, and say to him, ‘My brothers and my father’s household, who were in the land of Canaan, have come to me. ³²The men are shepherds; they have always been breeders of livestock, and they have brought with them their flocks and herds and all that is theirs.’ ³³So when Pharaoh summons you and asks, ‘What is your occupation?’ ³⁴you shall answer, ‘Your servants have been breeders of livestock from the start until now, both we and our fathers’—so that you may stay in the region of Goshen. For all shepherds are abhorrent to Egyptians.”

יוסף אשר ילד לו במצרים נפש שנים כל-
הנפש לבית יעקב הבאה מצרימה שבעים:
פ שטי ²⁸ ואת יהודה שלח לפניו אל-
יוסף להורת לפניו גשנה ויבאו ארצה גשן:
²⁹ ויאסר יוסף מרכבתו ויעל לקראת ישראל
אביו גשנה וירא אליו ויפל על צוואריו ויבך
על צוואריו עוד: ³⁰ ויאמר ישראל אל יוסף
אמותה הפעם אחרי ראותי את פניך כי עורף
חי: ³¹ ויאמר יוסף אל אחיו ואל בית אביו
אעלה ואגידה לפרעה ואמרה אליו אחי ובית-
אבי אשר בארץ פגעו באו אלי: ³² והאנשים
רעי צאן כִּי־אנשי מקנה היו וצאנם ובקרים וכל-
אשר להם הביאו: ³³ והיה כִּי־יקרא להם פרעה
ואמר מה מעשיכם: ³⁴ ואמרתם אנשי מקנה היו
עבדיך מנעורינו ועד עתה גם־אנחנו גם־אבותינו
בעבור תשובו בארץ גשן כִּי־תועבת מצרים כל-
רעה צאן:

numbered 66 Since this is not a typological or symbolic number in the Bible, it must therefore represent a genuine calculation based on the data just recorded. The key phrase is “who came to Egypt.” Accordingly, Er and Onan must be omitted because they died in Canaan. Verse 27 indicates that Manasseh and Ephraim are not included among the 66. They were born in Egypt and cannot be said to have come there. The computation would then be: Leah 31 + Zilpah 16 + Rachel 12 + Bilhah 7 = 66.

27. the total . . . 70 persons It is not clear how this number is obtained, but the aggregate of the summations given for each matriarch is 70. However, this computation does not include only “those who came to Egypt” (see preceding Comment). It might be assumed to refer to Jacob and 69 progeny—excluding Er and Onan but including Dinah. However, Exodus 1:5 repeats the number 70 tradition in reference to the totality of “Jacob’s issue”; it does not include Jacob in the calculation. On the other hand, Deuteronomy 10:22 states, “Your ancestors went down to Egypt seventy persons in all,” apparently including Jacob in that number. Furthermore, it must be remembered that the total of 70 excludes Jacob’s daughters-in-law and granddaughters, so that it is obviously not intended to be an exact census of the Israelites at this period.

There is no way of satisfactorily solving the problem and reconciling the differences unless 70 is understood here to be a typological rather than a literal number. It is here used, as elsewhere in biblical literature, to express the idea of totality. Thus it reiterates, in another way, the point made in verses 1 and 6–7, emphasizing the comprehensive nature of the descent to Egypt because this event is seen as the fulfillment of Genesis 15:13.

JACOB AND JOSEPH REUNITED (vv. 28–30)

28. This verse really belongs immediately after verse 7, from which it has been separated by the genealogy.

Judah For the rise of Judah to predominance, see the introduction to chapter 38. It is only fitting that Judah, who bore responsibility for separating Joseph from Jacob (34:26), should now be charged with arranging the reunion.

47 Then Joseph came and reported to Pharaoh, saying, “My father and my brothers, with their flocks and herds and all that is theirs, have come from the land of Canaan and are now in the region of Goshen.” ²And selecting a few of

מ"ז ויבא יוסף ויגד לפרעה ויאמר אבי ואחיי
וצאנכם ובקרם וכל אשר להם באו מארץ כנען
והנם בארץ גושן: ² ומקצה אחיו לקח חמשה

to point the way Hebrew *le-horot* is unclear in that it possesses no object and usually means “to instruct.” The present rendering is found in Targum Jonathan and is followed by Rashi and Radak. Josephus (Ant. 2.184) takes the verb to mean “to inform,” namely, to inform Joseph of his father’s imminent arrival. Another tradition—the Samaritan—understands it as “to present himself,” which implies a variant Hebrew text *le-heraot*.

29. ordered his chariot The Hebrew reads literally “hitched . . . ,” although it was not done by Joseph personally. The device of attributing this to him heightens the impression of Joseph excitedly rushing forth to Goshen to greet his father. Despite his exalted position, he does not wait for his father to come to him.

The reunion of father and son, cruelly separated for so long, is marked by a mute embrace and copious tears. No words are initially exchanged, for none can be adequate. Only the sounds of Joseph’s weeping pervade the silence.

30. “Now I can die” I am ready for death now that my dearest wish has been fulfilled.

PREPARATIONS FOR THE AUDIENCE WITH PHARAOH (vv. 31–34)

Earlier, Joseph had designated Goshen as the proposed domicile of the family (45:10), but Pharaoh, in confirming the invitation to settle in Egypt, has left the place unspecified (45:17–20). Joseph must now obtain clear and unambiguous royal authorization for Israelite settlement in Goshen. He therefore shrewdly prepares his brothers for an audience with Pharaoh and rehearses the speeches and answers to be given on that occasion so as to elicit the desired result.

32. This verse is part of Joseph’s address to be made to the king.

shepherds . . . breeders of livestock The difference between the two is not clear, for the latter designation (Heb. *’anshei mikneh*) occurs only here and in verse 34 and nowhere else in biblical literature. Furthermore, the brothers do not mention it in response to Pharaoh’s question (47:3). In all probability, this is simply a synonymous variant of “shepherd” without any more grandiose meaning.

34. One gets the impression that Joseph wishes to obscure the fact that the brothers have an additional occupation. This may support the suggestion that the Hebrews were also traders (see Comment to 34:10).

For all shepherds are abhorrent to Egyptians This remark is probably occasioned by the undoubted fact that the townsfolk held the shepherd in very low social esteem.

PHARAOH AND JOSEPH’S BROTHERS (vv. 1–6)

1. reported to Pharaoh Joseph carries out his previously stated intention (46:31). He must personally inform the king of his family’s arrival because Pharaoh had originally extended the invitation to them through him (45:16–20).

are now in the region of Goshen Joseph had selected this location from the beginning (45:10; 46:34). He now artfully insinuates the name into Pharaoh’s mind so as to prepare him for the brothers’ formal request (v. 4) and to predispose him in its favor.

his brothers, he presented them to Pharaoh. ³Pharaoh said to his brothers, “What is your occupation?” They answered Pharaoh, “We your servants are shepherds, as were also our fathers. ⁴We have come,” they told Pharaoh, “to sojourn in this land, for there is no pasture for your servants’ flocks, the famine being severe in the land of Canaan. Pray, then, let your servants stay in the region of Goshen.” ⁵Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “As regards your father and your brothers who have come to you, ⁶the land of Egypt is open before you: settle your father and your brothers in the best part of the land; let them stay in the region of Goshen. And if you know any capable men among them, put them in charge of my livestock.”

אֲנָשִׁים וַיִּצְגַם לִפְנֵי פַרְעֹה: 3 וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה אֶל-
אֶחָיו מֵהַמַּעֲשִׂיכֶם וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵל-פַּרְעֹה רֹעֵה צֹאן
עֲבָדֶיךָ גַם-אֲנַחְנוּ גַם-אֲבוֹתֵינוּ: 4 וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵל-
פַּרְעֹה לְגֹד בְּאֶרֶץ בְּאֵנוּ כִּי-אֵין מְרֻעָה לְצֹאן
אֲשֶׁר לְעֲבָדֶיךָ כִּי-כִבֵּד הָרַעַב בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וְעַתָּה
יִשְׁבוּ-נָא עֲבָדֶיךָ בְּאֶרֶץ גֹּשֶׁן: 5 וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה אֶל-
יוֹסֵף לֵאמֹר אֲבִיךָ וְאֶחָיֶךָ בָּאוּ אֵלֶיךָ: 6 אֶרֶץ
מִצְרַיִם לִפְנֶיךָ הוּא בְּמִטְבַּב הָאֶרֶץ הוֹשֵׁב אֶת-
אֲבִיךָ וְאֶת-אֶחָיֶיךָ יִשְׁבוּ בְּאֶרֶץ גֹּשֶׁן וְאִם-יִדְעָתָּ
וַיִּשְׂכְּבֶם אֲנָשֵׁי-חַיִּל וְשִׂמְתֶםם שָׂרֵי מִקְנֵה עַל-

2. The first clause is literally “and from the extremity of his brothers he took five men,” that is, “from the totality,” implying random selection.¹ For “five” as a round number, see Comment to 43:34.

3. *What is your occupation?* Pharaoh had not yet been told anything about the brothers, so his question is not surprising and was anticipated by Joseph (46:33).

4. *to sojourn* This statement² is the basis for the observation in the Passover Haggadah that Jacob intended to stay in Egypt only temporarily. The use of Hebrew *la-gur* (see Comment to 12:10) connects the migration to Egypt with the divine prophecy to Abraham, “Know well that your offspring shall be strangers (Heb. *ger*) in a land not theirs” (15:13). The awareness of their status as strangers in Egypt left a deep imprint on the Israelite consciousness that found expression in repeated ethical injunctions: “You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Exod. 22:20); “You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt” (Exod. 23:9); “The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Lev. 19:34); “You too must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Deut. 10:19).

5–6. These verses have occasioned difficulty because Pharaoh addresses Joseph, not the brothers; because his initial statement does not seem to relate to the petition, and because he appears to be informing Joseph of the arrival of the family when Joseph has already so informed him and has even introduced his brothers! Actually, Pharaoh does not really announce the arrival of Jacob and his sons. He makes a simple announcement of fact that acknowledges, and thus legitimates, the Israelite presence on Egyptian soil. If he does not reply to the brothers directly, it is because he grants the desired permission only as a special favor to Joseph. By addressing himself to Joseph, he implicitly authorizes him to be responsible for implementing the royal decree of verse 11. This authorization is phrased in laconic, almost staccato, tones that suggest the superior aloofness and absolute authority of Pharaoh.

6. *in the best part of the land* The king is true to his word (45:18).

capable men Hebrew *'anshei hayil* is sometimes used in the sense of “men of ability.”³

in charge of my livestock Hebrew *sarei mikneh*, literally “officers of cattle,” that is, superintendents of the royal cattle. This office is mentioned frequently in Egyptian inscriptions since the king possessed vast herds of cattle. Ramses III is said to have employed 3,264 men, mostly foreigners, to take care of his herds. The appointment of some of Joseph’s brothers to supervise the king’s cattle means that they are to be officers of the crown and thus will enjoy legal protection not usually accorded aliens.

⁷Joseph then brought his father Jacob and presented him to Pharaoh; and Jacob greeted Pharaoh. ⁸Pharaoh asked Jacob, “How many are the years of your life?” ⁹And Jacob answered Pharaoh, “The years of my sojourn [on earth] are one hundred and thirty. Few and hard have been the years of my life, nor do they come up to the life spans of my fathers during their sojourns.” ¹⁰Then Jacob bade Pharaoh farewell, and left Pharaoh’s presence.

¹¹So Joseph settled his father and his brothers, giving them holdings in the choicest part of the land of Egypt, in the region of Rameses, as Pharaoh had commanded. ¹²Joseph sustained his father, and his brothers, and all his father’s household with bread, down to the little ones.

אֲשֶׁר-לִי: 7 וַיָּבֵא יוֹסֵף אֶת-יַעֲקֹב אָבִיו וַיַּעֲמְדֵהוּ
לִפְנֵי פַרְעֹה וַיִּכְרַךְ יַעֲקֹב אֶת-פַּרְעֹה: 8 וַיֹּאמֶר
פַּרְעֹה אֶל-יַעֲקֹב כַּמָּה יְמֵי שְׁנֵי חַיֶּיךָ: 9 וַיֹּאמֶר
יַעֲקֹב אֶל-פַּרְעֹה יְמֵי שְׁנֵי מְגוּרַי שְׁלֹשִׁים וּמֵאת
שָׁנָה מְעַט וְרַעִים הָיוּ יְמֵי שְׁנֵי חַיֵּי וְלֹא הִשְׁגִּינוּ
אֶת-יְמֵי שְׁנֵי חַיֵּי אֲבֹתִי בְיַמֵּי מְגוּרֵיהֶם: 10 וַיִּכְרַךְ
יַעֲקֹב אֶת-פַּרְעֹה וַיֵּצֵא מִלִּפְנֵי פַרְעֹה: שְׁבִיעֵי
11 וַיּוֹשֶׁב יוֹסֵף אֶת-אָבִיו וְאֶת-אֶחָיו וַיִּתֵּן לָהֶם
אֶחָדָה בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בְּמִטְבַּת הָאָרֶץ בְּאֶרֶץ
רַעְמֶסֶס כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה פַרְעֹה: 12 וַיַּכְלִיל יוֹסֵף אֶת-
אָבִיו וְאֶת-אֶחָיו וְאֶת כָּל-בֵּית אָבִיו לֶחֶם לְפִי

PHARAOH AND JACOB (vv. 7–10)

Joseph now presents his father to Pharaoh. The reason for the separate audience, after that of his brothers, is probably that Joseph felt it would not be dignified for the aged patriarch to appear in the role of a supplicant.

7. *greeted* Hebrew *va-yevarekh*, literally “and he blessed,” here probably simply means “he saluted.”⁴ The content of the greeting is not given, but widespread custom in the ancient Near Eastern world dictated wishing the king long life as in 2 Samuel 16:16 and 1 Kings 1:31. Later rabbinic practice required the recital of a special blessing upon seeing a non-Israelite king: “Blessed be He who has imparted of His glory to His creatures” (Ber. 58a).

8. Perhaps Pharaoh wondered whether Jacob exceeded the ideal Egyptian life span of 110 (see Comment to 50:22).

9. *my sojourn* Pharaoh asked about the years of his “life.” Jacob answers regarding his “sojournings,” either in reference to the unsettled and turbulent nature of his life or as a figure of speech for “life’s journey.”⁵

hard Jacob recalls the unbroken chain of misfortunes and suffering that has been his lot.

my fathers In the mouth of Jacob the term refers only to Isaac and Abraham.⁶ The former lived to 180 (35:28), the latter to 175 (25:7).

10. *bade . . . farewell* Hebrew *va-yevarekh*, as in verse 7.⁷

Joseph’s Agrarian Policies (vv. 11–27)

11–12. These two verses serve as a transition to the following unrelated narrative. Joseph’s role as provider for his family reminds the reader that the famine is still in progress.

11. *the region of Rameses* Another name for Goshen (see Comment to 45:10). Ramses II, in the thirteenth century B.C.E., enlarged the city of Tanis and made it his capital. Thereafter, this royal name was attached to it.⁸ The use of the name here in Joseph’s time is anachronistic.

as Pharaoh had commanded Compare 45:18,20; 47:6.

12. *down to the little ones* The unique Hebrew *lefi ha-taf* should normally mean “by the mouth of/ according to the children.” The Septuagint understood the phrase to signify “per person.” Hizkuni took it to mean “as much as children can eat,” that is, “liberally.”

¹³Now there was no bread in all the world, for the famine was very severe; both the land of Egypt and the land of Canaan languished because of the famine. ¹⁴Joseph gathered in all the money that was to be found in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan, as payment for the rations that were being procured, and Joseph brought the money into Pharaoh's palace. ¹⁵And when the money gave out in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan, all the Egyptians came to Joseph and said, "Give us bread, lest we die before your very eyes; for the money is gone!" ¹⁶And Joseph said, "Bring your livestock, and I will sell to you against your livestock, if the money is gone." ¹⁷So they brought their livestock to Joseph, and Joseph gave them bread in exchange for the horses, for the stocks of sheep and cattle, and the asses; thus he provided them with bread that year in exchange for all their livestock. ¹⁸And when that year was ended, they came to him the next year and said to him, "We cannot hide from my lord that, with all the money and animal stocks consigned to my lord, nothing is left at my lord's disposal save our persons and our farmland. ¹⁹Let us not perish before your eyes, both we and our

הַטָּף: ¹³ וְלֶחֶם אֵין בְּכָל־הָאָרֶץ כִּי־כָבֵד הָרָעָב מְאֹד וַתִּלָּה אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וְאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן מִפְּנֵי הָרָעָב: ¹⁴ וַיִּלְקֹט יוֹסֵף אֶת־כָּל־הַכֶּסֶף הַנִּמְצָא בְּאֶרֶץ־מִצְרַיִם וּבְאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן בְּשֹׁבֵר אֲשֶׁר־הֵם שְׂבָרִים וַיָּבֵא יוֹסֵף אֶת־הַכֶּסֶף בֵּיתָה פְּרָעֹה: ¹⁵ וַיִּתֵּם הַכֶּסֶף מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וּמֵאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַיָּבִיאוּ כָל־מִצְרַיִם אֶל־יוֹסֵף לֵאמֹר הִבֵּה־לָנוּ לֶחֶם וְלָמָּה נָמוּת נִגְדֶּה כִּי אָפֶס כֶּסֶף: ¹⁶ וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף הֲבֹ מִקְנֵיכֶם וְאֶתְנֶנָּה לָכֶם בְּמִקְנֵיכֶם אִם־אָפֶס כֶּסֶף: ¹⁷ וַיָּבִיאוּ אֶת־מִקְנֵיהֶם אֶל־יוֹסֵף וַיִּתֵּן לָהֶם יוֹסֵף לֶחֶם בְּסוּסִים וּבְמִקְנֵה הַצֹּאן וּבְמִקְנֵה הַבְּקָר וּבְחֻמְרִים וַיִּנְהַלֶּם בְּלֶחֶם בְּכָל־מִקְנֵיהֶם בַּשָּׁנָה הַהִוא: ¹⁸ וַתֵּתֶם הַשָּׁנָה הַהִוא וַיָּבִיאוּ אֵלָיו בַּשָּׁנָה הַשְּׁנִיָּת וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוֹ לֹא־נִכְתָּר מֵאֲדָנִי כִּי אִם־תֵּתֶם הַכֶּסֶף וּמִקְנֵה הַבְּהֵמָה אֶל־אֲדָנִי לֹא נִשְׂאֵל לִפְנֵי אֲדָנִי בְּלִתֵּי אִם־גּוֹיְתָנוּ וְאֲדַמְתָּנוּ: ¹⁹ לָמָּה נָמוּת

13–26. The severity of the remaining years of famine is such that the people become wholly dependent upon the state for their survival. Joseph rises to the occasion and averts disaster through a series of drastic measures that, in effect, nationalize the land and livestock and turn the populace into tenant farmers of the state. This section has no connection with the story of the Israelites; a continuation of the narrative of chapter 41 describing the measures taken by Joseph in preparation for the famine, it has been included here because it provides examples of Joseph's wisdom and leadership capabilities. It also supplies an explanation for the extraordinary contrast between the Egyptian system, which concentrated land ownership in the hands of the state, and the Israelite ideal of private ownership of property. It is also likely that the Narrator wishes to emphasize the great benefits that Joseph brought to the crown, thus accentuating the base ingratitude of a later Pharaoh "who did not know Joseph" (Exod. 1:8). In this sense, this digression provides a link with the Book of Exodus.

13. *languished* The unique Hebrew form *va-telah* is taken as deriving from a stem *l-h-b*, a variant of *l-'-h*, "to be weary, helpless."⁹

14. *into Pharaoh's palace* Joseph took nothing for himself.¹⁰

15. *the land of Canaan* The threefold repetition of this phrase in verses 13–15 serves to remind us that if Jacob and his family had not migrated to Egypt they might have starved to death.

16. *sell* This is the sense of Hebrew *n-t-n* followed by the preposition *b*. The understood object is the "bread" mentioned in verse 15.¹¹

17. *horses* This is the first time the Bible mentions this animal, which had become widespread throughout the Near East by the middle of the sixteenth century B.C.E. Its place at the head of the list here is indicative of its high value.¹²

18. *the next year* Literally, "the second year." We are not told to what this refers; hence the present translation. The indefiniteness has given rise to various interpretations:¹³ (i) the second year of the famine, (ii) two years after the arrival of Jacob, (iii) the second of the remaining five years of famine, (iv) the seventh year of the famine. This last seeks to explain why the people ask for seed; the predicted end of the famine is at hand, and it is time to prepare for next year's harvest. It is a mistake to think that farmers do not sow their fields in years of famine.

land. Take us and our land in exchange for bread, and we with our land will be serfs to Pharaoh; provide the seed, that we may live and not die, and that the land may not become a waste.”

²⁰So Joseph gained possession of all the farm land of Egypt for Pharaoh, every Egyptian having sold his field because the famine was too much for them; thus the land passed over to Pharaoh. ²¹And he removed the population town by town, from one end of Egypt's border to the other.

²²Only the land of the priests he did not take over, for the priests had an allotment from Pharaoh, and they lived off the allotment which Pharaoh had made to them; therefore they did not sell their land.

²³Then Joseph said to the people, “Whereas I have this day acquired you and your land for Pharaoh, here is seed for you to sow the land. ²⁴And when harvest comes, you shall give one-fifth to Pharaoh, and four-fifths shall be yours as seed for the fields and as food for you and those in your households, and as nourishment for your children.” ²⁵And they said, “You have saved our lives! We are grateful to my lord, and we shall be serfs to Pharaoh.” ²⁶And Joseph made

לְעֵינֶיךָ גַם־אֲנַחְנוּ גַם־אֲדָמָתְנוּ קָנָה־אֲתָנוּ וְאֶת־
אֲדָמָתְנוּ בְּלֶחֶם וְנִהְיֶה אֲנַחְנוּ וְאֲדָמָתְנוּ עֲבָדִים
לְפָרְעָה וְתִזְרַע וְנַחֲיֶה וְלֹא נָמוּת וְהָאֲדָמָה לֹא
תִשָּׂם: ²⁰ וַיִּקַּן יוֹסֵף אֶת־כָּל־אֲדָמַת מִצְרַיִם
לְפָרְעָה כִּי־מָכְרוּ מִצְרַיִם אִישׁ שָׂדֵהוּ כִּי־חָזַק
עֲלֵהֶם הָרָעָב וְתִהְיֶה הָאָרֶץ לְפָרְעָה: ²¹ וְאֶת־הָעָם
הָעֹבֵד אֹתוֹ לְעָבָדִים מִקְצֵה גְבוּל־מִצְרַיִם וְעַד־
קְצֵהוּ: ²² רַק אֲדָמַת הַכֹּהֲנִים לֹא קָנָה כִּי חֶק
לַכֹּהֲנִים מֵאֵת פָּרְעָה וְאָכְלוּ אֶת־חֶקֶם אֲשֶׁר נָתַן
לָהֶם פָּרְעָה עַל־כֵּן לֹא מָכְרוּ אֶת־אֲדָמָתָם:
²³ וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף אֶל־הָעָם הֵן קָנִיתִי אֶתְכֶם הַיּוֹם
וְאֶת־אֲדָמָתְכֶם לְפָרְעָה הֲאֵלֵכֶם זֶרַע וּזְרַעְתֶּם
אֶת־הָאֲדָמָה: ²⁴ וְהִיָּה בַתְּבוּאָת וּנְתַתֶּם חֲמִישִׁית
לְפָרְעָה וְאַרְבַּע הִיָּדָת יִהְיֶה לְכֶם לְזֶרַע הַשָּׂדֶה
וְלֶאֱכֹלְכֶם וְלֶאֱשֶׁר בְּבֵתֵיכֶם וְלֶאֱכֹל לְטַפְּכֶם:
מִפֶּטֶר ²⁵ וַיֹּאמְרוּ הַחִיתִּינוּ נִמְצָא־חֵן בְּעֵינֵי
אֲדֹנָי וְהִינּוּ עֲבָדִים לְפָרְעָה: ²⁶ וַיִּשֶׂם אֹתָהּ יוֹסֵף

19. The suggestion to barter livestock for food had come from Joseph. Now the Egyptians initiate the proposal to surrender their land and become serfs of the crown.

provide the seed Egyptian sources document the practice of the state lending seed-corn to farmers for repayment at harvest time.

20. The Egyptian theory of government gave the pharaoh the supreme right of ownership of the land by virtue of his divine status. In practice, private landed property existed in all periods of Egyptian history, but after the expulsion of the Hyksos in the middle of the sixteenth century B.C.E., the major part of the land became the actual property of the state. There is no way, however, of determining to which period in Egyptian history the present story relates.

sold The Hebrew stem *m-k-r* does not distinguish between a sale for money and a barter arrangement.¹⁴

21. *he removed the population town by town* Literally, “the populace, he removed it to/by cities.” The exact meaning is uncertain, but it is generally understood as referring to a population transfer on a large scale,¹⁵ probably to oust farmers from nationalized lands.

22. *the land of the priests* The text seems to mean that since the temples received fixed royal endowments¹⁶ they were under no pressure to barter their lands for food or seed.

23–24. *Whereas . . . here is* The construction of the statement indicates that the provision of seed is contingent upon the barter of the peasants' land for food.

The state-controlled land is cultivated by the former landowners, who pay a tax of 20 percent of the harvest in return for the privilege and for the seed allotment. Such an interest rate was not considered excessive in the ancient Near East. During the reign of Hammurabi, for instance, the state's share of the harvest from administered fields varied between two-thirds and one-half after the deduction of production expenses. An interest rate of 20 percent on money loans was quite common in Babylon, while the rate for loans of produce was usually 33.3 percent.

25. *saved our lives* Contrast the fears expressed in verses 15 and 19.

grateful Joseph's actions cannot be measured by the moral standards that the Hebrew Bible, especially the prophetic tradition, has inculcated in Western civilization. Rather, they must be

it into a land law in Egypt, which is still valid, that a fifth should be Pharaoh's; only the land of the priests did not become Pharaoh's.

²⁷Thus Israel settled in the country of Egypt, in the region of Goshen; they acquired holdings in it, and were fertile and increased greatly.

VA-YEHI

²⁸Jacob lived seventeen years in the land of Egypt, so that the span of Jacob's life came to one hundred and forty-seven years. ²⁹And when the time approached for Israel to

לְחַקְ עַד־הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה עַל־אַדְמַת מִצְרַיִם לְפָרְעָה
לְחַמֵּשׁ רֶגֶק אֲדָמַת הַהִנְהָנִים לְבָדָם לֹא הָיְתָה
לְפָרְעָה: ²⁷ וַיָּשֶׁב יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בְּאֶרֶץ
גֹּשֶׁן וַיֵּאָחֲזוּ בָהּ וַיִּרְבּוּ וַיִּרְבּוּ מְאֹד:

ויחי

²⁸ וַיְחִי יַעֲקֹב בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם שִׁבְעַת עָשָׂר שָׁנָה
וַיְהִי יַמֵּי־יַעֲקֹב שְׁנַיִם חֲמִיִּישׁ וְאַרְבָּעִים
וּמֵאָתָּה שָׁנָה: ²⁹ וַיִּקְרְבוּ יַמֵּי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמוֹת

judged in the context of the ancient Near Eastern world, by whose norms Joseph emerges here as a highly admirable model of a shrewd and successful administrator. Nonetheless, a moral judgment on the situation is subtly introduced into the narrative by shifting the onus of responsibility for the fate of the peasants from Joseph to the Egyptians themselves. The peasants initiate the idea of their own enslavement (v. 19) and even express gratitude when it is implemented!¹⁷

26. still valid Here, as in 1 Samuel 30:25, the Hebrew formula *'ad ha-yom ha-zeh* is used in a legal context in which the Narrator bears witness to the fact that the ancient laws described in verses 22 and 24 were still operative in his day. The statement refers to the fact that at various periods of Egyptian history individual temple estates were exempt from taxation by royal decree.

27. Following the digression, the narrative resumes the story of the Israelites. This verse is closely connected with verse 11.

Israel The accompanying verb is in the singular form, whereas the succeeding three verbs are plural. The inconsistency is deliberate and the ambiguity intentional: Israel the individual merges with the national entity. The phenomenon has already been noted in the Comment to 46:3f., 8. It appears again in 48:20.

and were fertile and increased greatly God's blessing bestowed upon Jacob on his return from Haran, in 35:11, and reiterated as he was about to go down to Egypt, is now in the process of being fulfilled (cf. 48:4).

Jacob Prepares for Death (vv. 28–31)

Va-Yehi

Four verses were devoted to the passing of Abraham (25:7–10); two to the death of Isaac (35:28f.). In each case the numerical summation of the years of life immediately preceded the report of death. Here, in 47:28–50:14, the demise of Jacob is told in extraordinary detail, and several scenes come between the account of his lifespan and his death (47:28; 49:33). The explanation for this exceptional treatment of Jacob's end lies in the special circumstances surrounding his situation. He alone, of the patriarchs, dies on alien soil. He is therefore particularly concerned about interment in his ancestral grave, and burial in accordance with his wishes involves considerable effort and elaborate arrangements, all of which must be described. Furthermore, from the time that Jacob settled down in Canaan after returning from Haran, his life had been wholly intertwined with that of Joseph. Just as the beginning of the period in Canaan was marked by a chronological note involving seventeen years (37:2), so its close is similarly indicated (47:28). It is this literary framework that has influenced the placement of the numerical summation here, rather than with the actual announcement of death.

28. lived This term is an apt description of the years Jacob spent reunited with his beloved son, for something had died within him when Joseph disappeared, and his "spirit revived" with the knowledge that he was alive and well in Egypt. Jacob had thought this would be a brief happiness, the final experience of his life.¹⁸ Instead, he has enjoyed many more years.

die, he summoned his son Joseph and said to him, “Do me this favor, place your hand under my thigh as a pledge of your steadfast loyalty: please do not bury me in Egypt.³⁰ When I lie down with my fathers, take me up from Egypt and bury me in their burial-place.” He replied, “I will do as you have spoken.”³¹ And he said, “Swear to me.” And he swore to him. Then Israel bowed at the head of the bed.

וַיִּקְרָא לְבָנָו לְיוֹסֵף לֵאמֹר לֹא אֶסְנָא מִצְעָתִי חַן בְּעֵינֶיךָ שְׂיִסְנָא יָדְךָ תַּחַת יְרֵכִי וְעָשִׂיתָ עִמָּדִי חֶסֶד וְאַמֶּת אֶל־נָא תִקְבְּרֵנִי בְּמִצְרַיִם: וְשָׁכַבְתִּי עִם־אֲבֹתַי וְנִשְׂאָתְנִי מִמִּצְרַיִם וְקִבַּרְתָּנִי בְּקִבְרָתָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנֹכִי אֲעֲשֶׂה כְדַבְּרֶךָ: וַיֹּאמֶר הַשְּׂבָעָה לִּי וַיִּשָּׁבַע לוֹ וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל עַל־רֹאשׁ הַמֶּטֶה: פ

48 Some time afterward, Joseph was told, “Your father is

מָח וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַיֹּאמֶר לְיוֹסֵף

seventeen years This is precisely as many years as Joseph had lived with his father in Canaan (37:2). There was a similar pattern for Abraham, who lived exactly as many years in his father’s home (12:4) as in the lifetime of his son Isaac (21:5; 25:7).

one hundred and forty-seven The lifespans of the three patriarchs lend themselves to factorization according to the following pattern:

$$\text{Abraham } 175 = 5 \times 5 \times 7; \text{ Isaac } 180 = 6 \times 6 \times 5; \text{ Jacob } 147 = 7 \times 7 \times 3.$$

In this series, the squared number increases by one each time while the coefficient decreases by two. Furthermore, in each case the sum of the factors is 17.

Through their factorial patterns, the patriarchal chronologies constitute a rhetorical device expressing the profound biblical conviction that Israel’s formative age was not a concatenation of haphazard incidents but a series of events ordered according to God’s grand design.

29. place your hand See Comment to 24:2.

do not bury me in Egypt Similarly, Joseph later adjures his brothers to rebury him in the land of Canaan (50:25). This motif is found in the Egyptian Story of Sinuhe, where the exiled courtier asks, “What is more important than that I be buried in my native land?” The biblical examples, however, have an added dimension, for the deathbed requests are bound up with the divine promise of redemption and nationhood in the Land of Israel (cf. 48:21; 50:24f.).

30. When I lie down with my fathers An idiomatic expression for death, analogous to “going to one’s fathers” (see Comment to 15:15) or being “gathered to one’s kin” (see Comment to 25:8). It is applied equally to the righteous and the wicked, as such texts as 1 Kings 14:20 and 22:40 show. Since, as here, it most often precedes the notice of burial (cf., e.g., 1 Kings 11:43 and 2 Kings 8:24), and because it is used of Moses (Deut. 31:16), David (1 Kings 2:10), Ahaz (2 Chron. 28:27), and Manasseh (2 Kings 21:18), none of whom was actually buried in the ancestral grave, the phrase clearly refers to death and not to interment.

in their burial-place That is, in the Cave of Machpelah.

31. “Swear to me.” Jacob exacts this solemn oath in addition to the promise in order to strengthen Joseph’s hand when he will request the royal authorization needed to fulfill the difficult assignment. Indeed, Pharaoh later refers to the oath in granting permission.¹⁹

bowed at the head of the bed Being an invalid, the aged patriarch can only make some bodily gesture symbolic of prostration.²⁰ It is not clear whether it is a token of gratitude to Joseph or an expression of thanks and praise to God.

Chapter 48 has two main themes: the elevation, by adoption, of Joseph’s two sons to the status of Israelite tribes and the advance in status of Ephraim over the first-born Manasseh.

ill.” So he took with him his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. ²When Jacob was told, “Your son Joseph has come to see you,” Israel summoned his strength and sat up in bed.

³And Jacob said to Joseph, “El Shaddai appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan, and He blessed me, ⁴and said to me, ‘I will make you fertile and numerous, making of you a community of peoples; and I will assign this land to your offspring to come for an everlasting possession.’ ⁵Now, your two sons, who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt, shall be mine; Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine no less than Reuben and Simeon.

הִנֵּה אָבִיךָ חָלָה וַיִּקְרָח אֶת־שְׁנֵי בָנָיו עִמּוֹ אֶת־
מְנַשֶּׁה וְאֶת־אֶפְרַיִם: ² וַיִּגְדַּר לְיַעֲקֹב וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה
בָּנֶךָ יוֹסֵף בָּא אֵלֶיךָ וַיִּתְחַזֵּק יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיָּשָׁב עַל־
הַמֶּטֶה: ³ וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב אֶל־יוֹסֵף אֵל שְׁדַי נִרְאָה־
אֵלַי בְּלוּז בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתִי: ⁴ וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלַי
הַגִּנֵּי מִפְרֹדָּךְ וְהִרְבִּיתִּיךָ וַנִּתְתִּיךָ לְקָהָל עַמִּים
וְנָתַתִּי אֶת־הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת לְזֶרְעֶךָ אֶחָדִיךָ אֶחָזֶת
עוֹלָם: ⁵ וְעַתָּה שְׁנֵי־בָנֶיךָ הַנוֹלָדִים לְךָ בְּאֶרֶץ
מִצְרַיִם עַד־בָּאִי אֵלֶיךָ מִצְרַיִם לִי־הֵם אֶפְרַיִם
וּמְנַשֶּׁה כְּרֵאוּבֵן וְשִׁמְעוֹן יִהְיוּ־לִי: ⁶ וּמִוֹלַדְתֶּךָ

THE ADOPTION (vv. 1–12)

1. *Some time afterward* That is, following the oath ceremony described in the preceding four verses and within the closing year of Jacob’s life.

was told The impersonal nature of the Hebrew verb (lit. “and one said”) gives it the force of a passive.

“*Your father is ill*” This is the first reference to illness in the Bible.

So he took with him . . . The narrative framework, as opposed to the dialogues, uses an economy of words, leaving the destination and arrival to the reader’s imagination. The Septuagint adds, “He came to Jacob.”

2. *sat up* Out of respect for the office that Joseph represented.

3. *El Shaddai* On this divine epithet, see Comment to 17:1.

Luz This is the original name of Bethel, according to 28:19. At this site Jacob received a momentous revelation after he had returned from Paddan-aram, recounted in chapter 35. His name was changed to Israel, and the promises made to Abraham and Isaac were reiterated.

4. Jacob now paraphrases those divine promises (cf. 35:11–12) in order to establish the legal basis for his subsequent actions. As heir to the blessings, Jacob has the right to decide who is to be included in the “community of peoples” that will be known as Israel. Because only he who receives the divine blessing directly can impart it, Joseph, who never received a divine revelation, cannot endow his sons with tribal territory.

an everlasting possession Hebrew *’ahuzzat ’olam*¹ stands in a subtle contrast to 47:11 (*’ahuzah*; cf. 47:27), thereby emphasizing that the only true and inalienable “possession” of territory is the Land of Israel. Only God can give an “everlasting possession.” Pharaoh’s gift is transitory.

5–12. Jacob now formally adopts his two grandchildren, thereby elevating them to full membership in the Israelite tribal league.

The language and narration are noteworthy for their legal precision. The adopter is invariably called Israel (cf. 35:10); there is a declaration of intent comprising the careful, unambiguous designation of the persons involved and those excluded (vv. 5–6); the true identity of the boys present is established through interrogation of the father (vv. 8f.); certain physical acts reinforce the oral declaration (vv. 10–12).

Intra-family adoptions are well attested in the ancient Near East. In the Bible it is possible to construe the episodes dealing with Naomi and her grandson Obed (Ruth 4:16f.) and with Mordecai and Esther (Esther 2:7) as examples of this practice. A striking analogy to the present narrative is provided by an Akkadian legal document from Ugarit recording the adoption of a grandson by a grandfather who then makes him his heir (cf. 50:23).

6But progeny born to you after them shall be yours; they shall be recorded instead of their brothers in their inheritance. 7I [do this because], when I was returning from Paddan, Rachel died, to my sorrow, while I was journeying in the land of Canaan, when still some distance short of Ephrath; and I buried her there on the road to Ephrath”—now Bethlehem.

8Noticing Joseph’s sons, Israel asked, “Who are these?”

אֲשֶׁר־הוֹלַדְתָּ אַחֲרֵיהֶם לְךָ יְהִי עַל שֵׁם אֲחֵיהֶם יִקְרָאוּ בְּנִחְלָתָם: 7 וְאָנֹכִי בְּבֹאִי מִפְּדָן מֵתָהּ עָלַי רָחֵל בְּאֶרֶץ פְּנֵעוֹן בְּדֶרֶךְ בְּעוֹד כְּבָרַת־אֶרֶץ לְבֵא אֶפְרַתָּה וְאֶקְבְּרָהּ שָׁם בְּדֶרֶךְ אֶפְרַת הוּא בַּיַּת לְחַם: 8 וַיִּרְא יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־בְּנֵי יוֹסֵף וַיֹּאמֶר מִי אֵלֶּה: 9 וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף אֶל־אָבִיו בְּנֵי הֵם אֲשֶׁר־נָתַן

Ephraim and Manasseh Here Jacob mentions the younger son first, in contrast to the order in verse 1—a hint of impending developments.

Reuben and Simeon The parallel drawn between the two sons of Joseph and the two oldest sons of Jacob exemplifies the new legal status of the former.

6. *born to you* Hebrew *holadeta*, literally “you have begotten.” The past meaning of this verb is confirmed by the following participle, *ha-noladim* (v. 5), “who were born.” We therefore have here a fragment of a lost tradition, not otherwise referred to in the Bible, concerning other children born to Joseph, that is, clans who adhered to the “House of Joseph.” This interpretation finds much support among traditional exegetes such as Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, Ramban, and Radak. Another view, that of the Targums, Saadiah, and Rashi, is that the verb expresses a future possibility. Still other interpreters, such as the Lekaḥ Tov and Hizkuni, believe that the reference is to Joseph’s grandsons.

shall be yours They shall not constitute separate tribal entities but shall partake of the inheritance of either Manasseh or Ephraim.

7. Traditional commentators have by and large understood this verse to be an apologia by Jacob for troubling his son with the arduous task of burying him in the Cave of Machpelah when he himself had not done the same for Rachel, Joseph’s mother, who had died but a short distance from the site. However, this interpretation does not explain the intrusiveness of the verse in its present position. It would more appropriately belong with 47:29–31 or 49:29–32, both of which deal with Jacob’s instructions regarding his burial.

It is best to understand this chapter as being dependent on 35:9–20, which is composed of two sections: Verses 9–15 deal with the vision at Luz-Bethel and the divine promises of numerous progeny, a league of tribes, and possession of the land; immediately thereafter, verses 16–20 tell of Rachel’s death and burial. So here Jacob repeats the substance of these divine blessings to Joseph and follows with the report of Rachel’s death. It is quite natural that, on his deathbed, Jacob should recall his beloved wife who had died so young and for whom he had endured so much. Moreover, it was probably because she had been deprived of the opportunity to bear more children that her two grandchildren are adopted by Jacob as a substitute for those whom her death had robbed of the possibility of life. The mention of Ephrath may constitute a covert verbal allusion to Ephraim, who is soon to be the focus of Jacob’s attention.

Paddan The full place-name is Paddan-aram, as in 25:20; 35:9.²

to my sorrow Hebrew *alai*, literally “upon me.”³

while I was journeying Hebrew *ba-derekh* describes the attendant circumstance, not the location.⁴

some distance . . . See Comment to 35:16.

Ephrath See Comment to 35:19.

8–9. Jacob’s question seems to suggest that he does not know his grandsons seventeen years after arriving in Egypt! Traditional commentators have attempted to overcome this anomaly by connecting this verse with verse 10, which records the patriarch’s poor vision. They suggest that he

⁹And Joseph said to his father, “They are my sons, whom God has given me here.” “Bring them up to me,” he said, “that I may bless them.” ¹⁰Now Israel’s eyes were dim with age; he could not see. So [Joseph] brought them close to him, and he kissed them and embraced them. ¹¹And Israel said to Joseph, “I never expected to see you again, and here God has let me see your children as well.”

¹²Joseph then removed them from his knees, and bowed low with his face to the ground. ¹³Joseph took the two of them, Ephraim with his right hand—to Israel’s left—and Manasseh with his left hand—to Israel’s right—and brought them close to him. ¹⁴But Israel stretched out his right hand and laid it on Ephraim’s head, though he was the younger, and his left hand on Manasseh’s head—thus crossing his hands—although Manasseh was the first-born.

לִי אֱלֹהִים בְּזֶה וַיֹּאמֶר קַח־נָא אֵלַי וְאֶבְרַכְכֶם:
 שְׁנֵי יָמֵי וְעֵינַי יִשְׂרָאֵל כְּבָדוֹ מִזְקֵן לֹא יוּכַל
 לְרֹאֹת וַיִּגַּשׁ אֹתָם אֱלֹוֹ וַיִּשָּׂק לָהֶם וַיַּחְבֵּק לָהֶם:
 וַיֹּאמֶר יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־יֹסֵף רְאֵה פָנַי לֹא
 פָּלַלְתִּי וְהִנֵּה הִרְאָה אֹתִי אֱלֹהִים גַּם אֶת־זֶרְעֶךָ:
 וַיֹּצֵא יוֹסֵף אֹתָם מֵעַם בְּרַכְיוֹ וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ לְאַפְּיוֹ
 אֶרְצָה: ¹³ וַיִּקַּח יוֹסֵף אֶת־שְׁנֵיהֶם אֶת־אֶפְרַיִם
 בְּיָמִינוֹ מִשְׁמָאל יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶת־מְנַשֶּׁה בְּשִׂמְאֹלוֹ
 מִיְּמִין יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּגַּשׁ אֵלָיו: ¹⁴ וַיִּשְׁלַח יִשְׂרָאֵל
 אֶת־יָמִינוֹ וַיָּשֶׁת עַל־רֹאשׁ אֶפְרַיִם וְהוּא הַצְעִיר
 וְאֶת־שִׂמְאֹלוֹ עַל־רֹאשׁ מְנַשֶּׁה שֶׁכֵּל אֶת־יָדָיו כִּי
 מְנַשֶּׁה הַבְּכוֹר: ¹⁵ וַיְבָרֵךְ אֶת־יוֹסֵף וַיֹּאמֶר

could dimly discern the presence of two human forms but could not recognize them. Modern scholars generally regard the scene as belonging to a different strand of tradition.

Actually, we have here the second stage of the legal adoptive process, namely, the establishment of the true identity of the candidates for adoption by formal interrogation of the natural father.⁵

Israel This name, rather than Jacob, is used hereafter until the end of the chapter in order to reflect the change of name (35:10) upon which this episode is dependent. Further, the name Israel is more appropriate since the narrative concludes with tribal history.

10. Israel’s eyes . . . The statement explains Joseph’s reaction in the following scene. He attributes his father’s unusual act to his impaired vision.

kissed . . . embraced These two verbs appear together again in the Bible only in 29:13 and 33:4, where the embrace precedes the kiss. Here these acts, in reverse order, express not simply a show of affection but the reinforcement of the oral declarations through symbolic physical gestures that have significance in the adoptive process.

12. from his knees The reference is to Jacob’s knees, on or between which the two boys had been placed—another symbolic gesture that betokens acceptance and legitimation as son and heir. See Comment to 30:3.

and bowed low The Hebrew verb is singular, referring to Joseph. Several of the ancient versions render it in the plural, the subject being the two lads. The Hebrew singular may be distributive.

THE GRANDFATHER’S BLESSING (vv. 13–16)

13. Joseph stations the lads before their grandfather in such a way as to ensure that Jacob’s right hand, the symbol of action and power, will naturally rest on Manasseh, the first-born. The high importance that this has for Joseph is conveyed by the precision of language, the repeated use of “right” and “left” seven times in combination (vv. 13f.,17).

14. The placing of the hand upon the head establishes physical contact between the parties to the blessing, heightening the sense of intimacy and communication between the donor and the recipient. The Hebrew verb used here is not the same as that employed for the ceremony of the “laying on of the hands” used in the case of sacrificial offerings and ordination.⁶

crossing his hands The etymology of Hebrew *sikkel* is uncertain, but the sense is clear.

¹⁵And he blessed Joseph, saying,

“The God in whose ways my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked,
The God who has been my shepherd from my birth to this day—

¹⁶The Angel who has redeemed me from all harm—
Bless the lads.

In them may my name be recalled,
And the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac,
And may they be teeming multitudes upon the earth.

הָאֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר הִתְהַלְכִנוּ אֲבֹתַי לְפָנָיו
אֲבָרְהָם וְיִצְחָק
הָאֱלֹהִים הָרַעְדָה אֹתִי
מֵעוֹדִי עַד-הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה:
16 הַמַּלְאָךְ הַגָּאֵל אֹתִי מִכָּל-רָע
יְבָרֵךְ אֶת-הַנְּעָרִים
וְיִקְרָא בְהֵם שְׁמִי
וְשֵׁם אֲבֹתַי אֲבָרְהָם וְיִצְחָק
וְיִדְגוּ לְרֹב בְּקִרְבֵּי הָאָרֶץ: שְׁלִישִׁי

15. *he blessed Joseph* Mention of Joseph here is surprising since the blessing is wholly directed to the two grandsons. The Septuagint reads “he blessed them,” and the Vulgate has “. . . the sons of Joseph.” Traditional commentators explain that a father is the vicarious recipient of blessings bestowed on his children.

my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked Jacob, out of modesty, does not include himself.

my shepherd The image for the deity as a shepherd is common throughout ancient Near Eastern literature and appears frequently in the Bible.⁷ It expresses the idea of God as provider, protector, and guide.

16. *The Angel* On biblical angelology, see Excursus 10. The capitalization reflects the fact that the parallelistic structure of verses 15–16 strongly suggests that “angel” is here an epithet of God. No one in the Bible ever invokes an angel in prayer, nor in Jacob’s several encounters with angels is there any mention of one who delivers him from harm. When the patriarch feels himself to be in mortal danger, he prays directly to God, as in 32:10–13, and it is He who again and again is Jacob’s guardian and protector (28:15,20; 31:3; 35:3). Admittedly, “Angel” as an epithet for God is extraordinary, but since angels are often simply extensions of the divine personality, the distinction between God and angel in the biblical texts is frequently blurred (cf. Gen. 31:3,11,13; Exod. 3:2,4). Nevertheless, this verse may reflect some tradition associated with Bethel, not preserved in Genesis, concerning an angelic guardian of Jacob (cf. 31:13; 35:3). An echo of this may be found in Hosea 12:5.

Bless For blessing by an angel, cf. 32:27,30.

In them may my name be recalled “May my name . . . be perpetuated through Ephraim and Manasseh”; that is, may they ever be part of the Israelite tribal confederation identifying themselves with the history, traditions, and values of their patriarchs.

teeming multitudes Hebrew *ve-yidgu*, a unique verb apparently formed from *dag*, “fish,” a symbol of proliferation and multiplicity (cf. Num. 11:22). The two censuses taken in the course of the wilderness wanderings show the populousness of the Joseph tribes. At the beginning of the period, Ephraim and Manasseh jointly numbered 72,700 male adults (Num. 1:32–35). Forty years later, the figure was 85,200 (Num. 26:28–37), exceeding the combined population of Reuben and Simeon. Moses’ farewell address in Deuteronomy 33:17 refers to “the myriads of Ephraim” and “the thousands of Manasseh,” and the huge population posed a special problem for Joshua in the allotment of tribal territories recounted in Joshua 17:14–18.

REVERSAL OF SENIORITY (vv. 17–20)

The texts that record Manasseh as being the natural first-born must reflect an exceedingly early and authentic phase in the history of the Israelite tribal relationships, a phase in which Manasseh enjoyed hegemony over Ephraim. There would be no conceivable reason to invent such a tradition, given subsequent developments. The present episode provides an explanation for the reversal, with

¹⁷When Joseph saw that his father was placing his right hand on Ephraim's head, he thought it wrong; so he took hold of his father's hand to move it from Ephraim's head to Manasseh's. ¹⁸"Not so, Father," Joseph said to his father, "for the other is the first-born; place your right hand on his head." ¹⁹But his father objected, saying, "I know, my son, I know. He too shall become a people, and he too shall be great. Yet his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his offspring shall be plentiful enough for nations." ²⁰So he blessed them that day, saying, "By you shall Israel invoke blessings, saying: God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh." Thus he put Ephraim before Manasseh.

17 וַיֵּרָא יוֹסֵף בְּיָשִׁית אָבִיו יְדֵימִינוֹ עַל־רֹאשׁ אֶפְרַיִם וַיֵּרַע בְּעֵינָיו וַיִּתְמַךְ יַד־אָבִיו לְהַסִּיר אֹתָהּ מֵעַל רֹאשׁ־אֶפְרַיִם עַל־רֹאשׁ מְנַשֶּׁה: 18 וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף אֶל־אָבִיו לֹא־בֶן אֲבִי בִּיזָה הַבְּכֹר שֵׁם יִמְיָנְךָ עַל־רֹאשׁוֹ: 19 וַיִּמָּאֵן אָבִיו וַיֹּאמֶר יָדְעֵתִי בְנִי יָדְעֵתִי גַם־הוּא יִהְיֶה־לְעַם וְגַם־הוּא יִגְדֹל וְאוֹלָם אַחֲרָיו הַקָּטָן יִגְדֹל מִמֶּנּוּ וְזָרְעוֹ יִהְיֶה מְלֵאֵי הַגּוֹיִם: 20 וַיְבָרְכֵם בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לֵאמֹר בְּךָ יִבְרַךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר יִשְׁמַךְ אֱלֹהִים כָּאֶפְרַיִם וְכַמְנַשֶּׁה

Ephraim becoming the more powerful and more influential of the two tribes, even to the extent that its name eventually became synonymous with the kingdom of Israel.⁸ This phenomenon is traced to Jacob's blessing. Following his adoption of Joseph's two sons, Jacob now exercises his prerogative to set aside chronological priority and to grant Ephraim preferential status.

17. *he thought it wrong* That is, to disregard the rule of primogeniture. He attributes the "error" to his father's failing eyesight (v. 10), an ironic touch in view of the manner in which Jacob years before had exploited his own father's failing vision (27:1–29).

19. *I know* That is, who is the real first-born and how you placed the two sons before me.

shall be greater than he Strangely, according to the census taken in the second year after the Exodus, the population of Ephraim exceeded that of Manasseh (Num. 1:33,35), while the opposite is the case a generation later (Num. 26:34,37). Some disaster seems to have befallen the tribe, reducing its population for a while. Perhaps an echo of this is to be found in an obscure narrative in 1 Chronicles 7:20–23 to the effect that the native Gathites slew the sons of Ephraim, who had raided their cattle, and their father mourned for them many days. At any rate, Moses' farewell address reflects the numerical superiority of Ephraim.

plentiful enough for nations Hebrew *melo' ha-goyim*, literally "the fullness/mass of the nations."⁹ Jacob transfers to Ephraim the contents of the blessing that he himself had received (v. 4; 35:11). This is probably an interpretation of the name "Ephraim" that is suggestive of fertility (see Comment to 41:51).

20. Jacob's blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh (v. 16), interrupted by Joseph, is now resumed. There can be no greater blessing for the two lads than that their names be invoked by future generations in Israel as paradigms of a glorious destiny. The full meaning of the benediction is clear from a similar formula used by Jeremiah, though to negative effect: "And the whole community of Judah in Babylonia shall use a curse derived from their fate: 'May God make you like Zedekiah and Ahab, whom the king of Babylon consigned to the flames!'—because they did vile things in Israel" (Jer. 29:22f.). That the citation of ancient worthies in the conferring of blessings must have been more widespread in Israel than is indicated by the literature is illustrated in Ruth 4:11–12: "All the people at the gate and the elders answered, . . . May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, both of whom built up the House of Israel. . . . And may your house be like the house of Perez whom Tamar bore to Judah. . . ."

By you The Hebrew uses the singular either in reference to Joseph, as in verse 15, or as a distributive. The latter usage in a blessing is well exemplified by the Priestly Benediction (Num. 6:23, "them"; vv. 24–26, "you" sing.).

Israel See Comment to 47:27.

²¹Then Israel said to Joseph, “I am about to die; but God will be with you and bring you back to the land of your fathers. ²²And now, I assign to you one portion more than to your brothers, which I wrested from the Amorites with my sword and bow.”

וַיֹּאמֶר יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל-יוֹסֵף הֲנֵה אֲנִי מֵת וְהָיָה אֱלֹהִים עִמָּכֶם וְהֵשִׁיב אֶתְכֶם אֶל-אֶרֶץ אֲבֹתֵיכֶם: ²² וְאֲנִי נֹתְתִי לְךָ שְׂכֶם אֶחָד עַל-אֶחָיִךְ אֲשֶׁר לָקַחְתִּי מִיַּד הָאֲמֹרִי בְחַרְבִּי וּבִקְשָׁתִי: פ רביעי

A GIFT TO JOSEPH (vv. 21–22)

21. I am about to die; but God will be with you . . . The apparently unrelated clauses allude, by virtue of their juxtaposition, to the sharp contrast between the present situation that permits Jacob to be buried in the promised land and the impending bondage in Egypt. Yet future redemption is assured because God wills it.

with you . . . The Hebrew uses the plural form. Jacob speaks through Joseph to the entire people.

22. one portion . . . Hebrew *shekhem 'ahad* is of uncertain meaning and has generated varied interpretations. The present rendering, which is that of the Targums, Peshitta, and Vulgate, has been overwhelmingly accepted by Jewish commentators although devoid of philological support.¹⁰ If correct, it means that Jacob gives Joseph a double share, thus elevating him to the status of first-born. Such a tradition is indeed preserved in 1 Chronicles 5:1–2. Because Hebrew *shekhem* usually means “shoulder,” it has been assumed that, like its synonym *katef* in Numbers 34:11 and Joshua 15:8, *shekhem* can be used in the sense of “shoulder,” that is, “side/slope, of a mountain.” However, this usage too is not otherwise paralleled. Most likely, *shekhem* must be connected with the city of Shechem, which is so intimately associated with Jacob and Joseph. Jacob bought a parcel of land there (Gen. 33:18f.; Josh. 24:32), the seduction of Dinah took place there, and Simeon and Levi massacred its inhabitants (Gen. 34). It was to Shechem that Jacob sent Joseph to visit his brothers (Gen. 37:12,14), and Joseph himself is to be buried in the city (Josh. 24:32). Moreover, Shechem lay within the future territory of Joseph’s two sons near the border between the two tribes Ephraim and Manasseh (Josh. 17:7), and it was to become the most important city in the kingdom of northern Israel (cf. 1 Kings 12:1,25).

The identification of Hebrew *shekhem* in this verse with the city of Shechem is reflected in the Septuagint translation and in early Jewish sources. It has been accepted by many traditional commentators as well. Yet there are difficulties. First, the phrase “one Shechem” is very strange, and, in any case, Hebrew usage requires a feminine adjective with a city name (*'ahat*, not *'ahad*). These problems may perhaps be overcome if *shekhem* is a play on words using a vocable whose meaning is now lost (possibly “portion”), which alludes to the city of Shechem.

The historical problem is more difficult. Jacob did not participate in the raid on the city and, in fact, denounced the action, as related in Genesis 34:30 and 49:5–7, while the plot of land he held there was purchased peacefully, not taken in war. This is made clear in Genesis 33:18f. and Joshua 24:32. Hence, it cannot be said that Jacob captured Shechem by his “sword and bow.” Sensing the difficulties, early tradition interpreted this phrase figuratively for “prayer and petition,” or “*mitsvot* and good deeds,”¹¹ or as a metaphorical expression for divine help. More likely, the reference is to some tradition in the life of Jacob regarding a war against Shechem in which he participated but which has not otherwise been preserved in the Bible. Echoes of such an event may well be present in postbiblical literature. In this connection, it is interesting that although Joshua delivered his farewell address and conducted a covenant ceremony in Shechem, where a shrine already existed (Josh. 24:26), the Book of Joshua contains no report of the conquest of that city. This tends to support the likelihood of a pre-Mosaic Israelite conquest of Shechem. Possibly the city was razed in such a conquest and remained largely in ruins until it was reoccupied by Joshua without a fight. See Excursus 26.

from the Amorites In Genesis 34 the inhabitants are described as “Hivites.” As in many other passages, “Amorite” is used here as a generic term for the pre-Israelite peoples of Canaan (see Comment to 15:16).

The Testament of Jacob (vv. 1–33)

Before his death Jacob summons all his sons to his bedside to hear his farewell words, addressing each individually through a series of aphorisms in poetic form. This document (vv. 1–27) is the first sustained piece of Hebrew poetry in the Torah. It is a combination of three literary genres: the deathbed blessing familiar to us from earlier patriarchal narratives, such as 27:27ff., 28:1–4 and 39f.; the farewell address found later in the Bible, as in Joshua 23f. and 1 Kings 2:1–9; and the tribal poem, as in Deuteronomy 33 and Judges 5. Although the composition of these verses conforms to the general patterns that characterize biblical poetry, there is much uncertainty of meaning, extreme allusiveness, and considerable double entendre. The chapter is the most difficult segment of the Book of Genesis.

Genesis 49 is widely known as “The Blessing of Jacob.” However, as Ibn Ezra recognized long ago, this designation is not strictly accurate because the poems contain material of a very mixed nature. Blessings and curses, censure and praise, geographical and historical observations—all are included. For this reason, a title such as “The Last Words of Jacob” or “The Testament of Jacob” better suits the context.

In origin, the collection of aphorisms about the tribes is not a unity, and no inner thread of logic binds the diverse elements together. The individual tribal traditions embedded in the poetry are undoubtedly independent of each other and relate to widely separate and discrete situations. This was fully recognized by the medieval Jewish exegetes, who were also quite aware of the fact that some aphorisms appear to refer to past individual acts of the eponymous ancestor, the remote hero from whom the tribe derived its name, while others allude to tribal history hundreds of years later. Modern scholarship has added almost nothing to the great variety of medieval exegesis in its attempt to unravel the historic background of the sayings, except that the medievals treated these as prophetic, whereas the moderns would be generally inclined to view them as retrojections from later historical reality. See Excursus 23.

An external unity that lends cohesion and meaning to the whole has been imposed upon the diverse material. The poem is encased within a prose framework, the passing of the patriarch, which provides the appropriate setting for its placement within the Joseph narrative. This setting reflects the popular belief in the common origin of the tribes and the basic unity of the nation of Israel. Throughout the chapter, the names “Jacob” and “Israel” each appear five times, the equality of distribution symbolizing the dual character of the patriarch and his sons, now as individual personalities, now as the personifications of the nation with its tribal constituents, as in verse 27. On this phenomenon, see Excursus 25. The aphorisms spoken by Jacob are presented as prophetic pronouncements that will ultimately determine the character and destiny of the future tribes. Also, the actions and behavior of the ancestors leave an indelible imprint on their descendants, affecting the course of history. It is fitting that the Book of Genesis, which opened with the creative power of the divine word, closes with the notion of the effective power of the inspired predictive word of the patriarch.

Three distinct narrative cycles converge here, at the end of the book. Firstly, the patriarchal period began with a divine promise of nationhood to Abraham (12:2), and the fulfillment of that promise is expressed here through “the twelve tribes of Israel” (49:28). Secondly, the Jacob stories, too, commenced with God’s assurance of numerous offspring (28:14), and the scene of the dying patriarch surrounded by his sons and grandsons is its proper conclusion. Finally, the first act of the Joseph drama (chap. 37) was immediately succeeded by the fortunes of Judah (chap. 38), and throughout the Joseph biography the personality of Judah repeatedly injects itself in a point-counterpoint relationship. It is surely no coincidence that these two tribes dominate the poem to the extent that five verses are devoted to each, together totaling ten of the twenty-four lines of poetry.

The literary structure is the product of careful design. The tribal order corresponds neither to the sequence of birth, as recounted in chapters 29–30, nor to any of the tribal lists found elsewhere in the Torah. The six sons of Leah are addressed first and the two of Rachel last. In between come the sons of the maidservants; the two sons of Zilpah, maid of Leah, are inserted between the two sons of Bilhah, maid of Rachel. This yields a deliberate chiasmic arrangement:

LEAH, Bilhah-Zilpah, Zilpah-Bilhah, RACHEL.

Each group is presented in a descending order of seniority. The single exception is Issachar and Zebulun, reversed for historical reasons (see Comment to v. 13).

49 And Jacob called his sons and said, “Come together that I may tell you what is to befall you in days to come.

²Assemble and hearken, O sons of Jacob;

Hearken to Israel your father:

³Reuben, you are my first-born,

מ"ט וַיִּקְרָא יַעֲקֹב אֶל־בָּנָיו וַיֹּאמֶר הֲאִסְפוּ
וְאִגִּידָה לָכֶם אֵת אֲשֶׁר־יִקְרָא אֶתְכֶם בְּאַחֲרֵית
הַיָּמִים:

² הַקְבְּצוּ וּשְׁמְעוּ בְנֵי יַעֲקֹב
וּשְׁמְעוּ אֶל־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲבִיכֶם:
³ רְאוּבֵן בְּכֹרִי אֶתָּה

A PROSE INTRODUCTION (v. 1)

1. The scene presupposes the preceding statement (48:21): “I am about to die.”

called That is, he sent for his sons.

Come together Hebrew *he'asfu* is paralleled by *hikkavtsu*, to “assemble,” in verse 2. The use of these two verbs, which constitute a fixed pair of synonyms in Hebrew poetry,¹ is evidence that this introductory prose sentence is an organic part of the whole composition.

what is to befall you The reference is to the distant future. Jacob is speaking to the individual tribes personified as his sons.

in days to come Hebrew *be-'aharit ha-yamim*, like its Akkadian counterpart *ina abrat umē*, means simply “in the future,” without precise definition. In the Torah the phrase is used in a context of historical time, but in prophetic literature the phrase became a technical term for the “end-time” (*eschaton*), when the historical process would reach its culmination and God’s grand design for the human race would be fulfilled. Because the later eschatological meaning of the term *'aharit ha-yamim* (“the end of days”) is not appropriate to the contents of the poem, rabbinic exegesis has the divine spirit (Shekhinah) departing from Jacob just as he was about to reveal to his sons the secrets of messianic times.²

THE POEM (vv. 2–27)

2. *hearken . . . Hearken* The repetition of the same word at the beginning of both parallel clauses, a phenomenon known as anaphora, is a characteristic of biblical Hebrew poetry.³

hearken, O sons . . . By adopting a standard formula of wisdom literature,⁴ the poet has cleverly woven the image of a sage addressing his disciples into the father-sons relationship.

REUBEN (vv. 3–4)

Reuben is censured for the flaws in his character and for his moral failing, hinted at in 35:22. He has proved himself unworthy of inheriting the headship of the tribes upon his father’s death and must therefore forfeit the prerogatives that otherwise naturally flow from the first-born status.

On one level, the demotion of Reuben reflects the ideal of leadership in Israel. Those who hold the responsibility of high office must adhere to moral norms. Misconduct that might be overlooked in men of lesser status assumes notoriously magnified proportions when perpetrated by those who rule. The frequent confrontations between kings and prophets in Israel clearly illustrate the application of this principle.

From an historical viewpoint, Reuben’s loss of leadership must reflect very early traditions. Since at no period is there any record of the hegemony of this tribe, there cannot be any possible reason for inventing its first-born status. Hence, its consistent place at the head of the tribal lists in the Bible must be an authentic echo of a state of affairs that existed in dim antiquity. The same situation obtains in Reuben’s prominent role in the sale of Joseph into slavery (see Comment to 37:21). See Excursus 23.

The legal situation behind Reuben’s loss of his first-born status also points to an early period when it was still possible for a father to annul the birthright of his first-born son, in contrast to the later legislation of Deuteronomy 21:15–17 (see Comment to 25:29–34).

My might and first fruit of my vigor,
 Exceeding in rank
 And exceeding in honor.
 4Unstable as water, you shall excel no longer;
 For when you mounted your father's bed,
 You brought disgrace—my couch he mounted!

כְּחֵי וְרֵאשִׁית אוֹנִי
 יִתֵּר שְׂאֵת וְיִתֵּר עָוִי:
 4 פָּחוּ כְּמַיִם אֶל־תֹּתֵר
 כִּי עָלִית מִשְׁכְּבֵי אָבִיךָ
 אַז חָלַלְתָּ יְצוּעֵי עֲלֵה: 5

3. *My might* An ellipsis for “the fruit of my might” (cf. 4:12), that is, “of my virility.”

my vigor Hebrew *'on*, in parallel with “might” (Heb. *koah*), means here the procreative powers.⁵ The designation of the first-born as “the first fruit of one’s vigor” is found elsewhere in both legal and poetic texts, such as Deuteronomy 21:17 and Psalms 78:51 and 105:36. The rendering “first fruit” for Hebrew *re'shit* (lit. “beginning”) is based on the usage of the term in agricultural contexts.⁶ The word might also appropriately be translated “choicest product,” as in Deuteronomy 33:21, 1 Samuel 2:29, and Amos 6:6.

Exceeding Hebrew *yeter*, literally “excellence.” The meaning is: Being the first-born, you should have preeminence over your brothers.

rank Hebrew *se'et*, literally “exaltation,” is used as an attribute of both man, as in Habakkuk 1:7 and Psalms 62:5, and God, as in Job 13:11 and 31:23.

honor Hebrew *'az* usually means “might, strength,” but it is frequently used together with such terms as “glory” (Heb. *kavod*), as in Psalms 29:1 and 63:3, “majesty” (Heb. *ga'avah*), as in Psalms 68:35, and “splendor” (Heb. *tif'eret, hadar*), as in Psalms 96:6 and Proverbs 31:25. It is an attribute of royalty in 1 Samuel 2:10.

4. *Unstable* Hebrew *pahaz*, an abstract noun, is unique, although other forms of the same stem exist. In Judges 9:4 and Zephaniah 3:4 the reference is to “reckless” men (Heb. *pohazim*); in Jeremiah 23:32 the false prophets are said to have led the people astray with “their reckless” (*pahazutam*) lies. Some light is thrown on the range of meaning by reference to cognate languages: Arabic, “to be haughty, boastful, reckless”; Aramaic and Syriac, “to be wanton, lascivious.” In rabbinic Hebrew the verb is used of rising passion (Ned. 9b, Naz. 4b). Jacob would thus be censuring Reuben for acting in an irresponsible, impetuous manner, casting off all moral restraint, even as a torrent of water rushes wildly headlong. For the image of water applied to character, see Isaiah 57:20: “But the wicked are like the troubled sea / Which cannot rest, / Whose waters toss up mire and mud.”

excel no longer That is, you have lost your preeminence. Hebrew *'al totar* would normally mean, “you shall not leave/have left over,” as in Ruth 2:14 but is here employed in a play on *yeter*, “excellence” (v. 3).

mounted . . . bed The reference is to the incestuous act of Reuben recorded in 35:22 (see Comment) and again mentioned in 1 Chronicles 5:1: “Reuben the first-born of Israel. He was the first-born; but when he defiled his father’s bed, his birthright was given to the sons of Joseph, son of Israel. . . .”⁷

bed Hebrew *mishkevei*, in the plural, is always used in a context of carnal relations, as in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. The phrase is probably elliptical for “the bed of your father’s wife.”

You brought disgrace Hebrew stem *h-l-l*, “to pollute, defile, profane,” is used in connection with sexual depravity, as in Leviticus 19:29 and 21:9. The present text presents a problem in that the verb otherwise invariably takes a direct object. Also, the understanding of the verse is complicated by the abrupt change of person: “he mounted!” Mention of the incident in 1 Chronicles 5:1—“he defiled his father’s bed”—suggests that “my couch” here is the object of the verb *h-l-l* and does double duty as the object of the following verb as well. The rendering would then be: “You defiled my couch—my couch he mounted!” The last clause is an aside addressed to the assembled sons.

⁵Simeon and Levi are a pair;
 Their weapons are tools of lawlessness.
⁶Let not my person be included in their council,
 Let not my being be counted in their assembly.
 For when angry they slay men,
 And when pleased they maim oxen.

5 שְׁמֵעוֹן וְלֵוִי אֲחִים
 כְּלֵי חַמָּס מְכַרְתֵּיהֶם:
 6 בְּסֹדֶם אֶל־תְּבֵא נַפְשִׁי
 בְּקַהְלָם אֶל־תִּתְחַד כְּבָרִי
 כִּי בְאַפָם הָרְגוּ אִישׁ
 וּבְרַצְנָם עָקְרוּ־שׂוֹר:

SIMEON AND LEVI (vv. 5–7)

These two brothers are strongly censured for acts of violence and cruelty. Since all the others are individually addressed, the linkage of these two most likely refers to their combined attack on the city of Shechem, which is described in chapter 34. No other instance of joint activity is recorded anywhere. Jacob’s initial response to the atrocity was fear for the safety of his group (34:30). Now, with the passage of time, the patriarch renders a moral verdict on the act. With Reuben disqualified, Simeon was next in line of seniority to inherit the mantle of leadership; after him came Levi. The Testament of Jacob explains why neither of them did. The poem is clearly moving toward the glorification of Judah.

The tribe of Simeon completely lost its importance. In the first Israelite census the tribe numbered 59,300 (Num. 1:23); for unknown reasons, its population was reduced to 22,200 by the end of the wilderness wanderings (Num. 26:14). Neither the Blessing of Moses (Deut. 33) nor the Song of Deborah (Judg. 5) mentions the tribe. From Joshua 19:1 and 1 Chronicles 4:24–43, it is clear that Simeon was largely swallowed up by Judah and remained unsettled until quite late in the monarchy period.

Levi is here depicted as a purely secular, warlike tribe. There is no hint of its future sacerdotal status. Its martial qualities are still evident in the Exodus period, but at that time its association with the cult is well defined (Exod. 32:26ff.; Deut. 33:11). By conquest and settlement times, the Levites play only a sacral role; they do not participate in the wars, despite their earlier reputation. Jacob’s Testament thus reflects a very early tradition. This conclusion is reinforced by the further striking contrast between Levi here as a tribe in disfavor and the consistent concept of the other Torah sources, such as Numbers 3:12f., 8:14–18, and 16:9f., that the Levites were God’s elect who enjoyed a privileged status. Similarly, the explanation implied here that the lack of tribal territory is in punishment for reprehensible conduct conflicts with the reasons given in other texts, which attribute it to the spiritual destiny and special status and emoluments granted the tribe (Num. 18:20–24). This holds true even in Deuteronomy (10:8f.; 18:1f.) in which the Levites belong to the economically depressed classes (12:12; 14:27ff.). Genesis 49:5–7 thus echoes an early, independent, pre-conquest tradition.

5. *a pair* Hebrew *’ahim*, literally “brothers,” that is, partners and allies.⁸

Their weapons Hebrew *mekheroteihem*. Any translation of this unique word is guesswork. Neither the ancient versions nor medieval exegetes preserved any convincing tradition.⁹ The present rendering is based on Hebrew *k-r-h*, “to dig,” hence “a digging or piercing instrument.” A translation “wares,” based on the stem *m-k-r*, “to sell,” is particularly attractive in that it becomes an ironic comment on the response of the two brothers to the offer of the Shechemites, as reported in Genesis 34:10.

6. Jacob dissociates himself from the activities of these two tribes because of their disregard for human values.

council/assembly Hebrew *sod/kahal* are here the tribal gatherings at which decisions are made.¹⁰

my being Hebrew *kavod*, usually translated “honor,” is the God-endowed quality that distinguishes humans from other forms of life, as it is expressed in Psalms 8:6. *Kavod* expresses the essence of being and as such is found in parallel with such terms as *nefesh*, “person,” or *hayyim*, “life,” as here and in Psalms 7:6, and *leb*, “heart,” in Psalms 16:9, 57:8f., and 108:2.¹¹

⁷Cursed be their anger so fierce,
 And their wrath so relentless.
 I will divide them in Jacob,
 Scatter them in Israel.
⁸You, O Judah, your brothers shall praise;
 Your hand shall be on the nape of your foes;
 Your father's sons shall bow low to you.

7 אָרוּר אַפְסֵם כִּי עָז
 וְעִבְרַתְם כִּי קָשָׁתָה
 אֲחַלְקֵם בִּיעֲקֹב
 וְאֶפְיָצֵם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל: ס
 8 יְהוּדָה אַתָּה יִרְוּךָ אֲחִיךָ
 יָדְךָ בְּעֵרֶף אִיבֶיךָ
 יִשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ לְךָ בְּנֵי אָבִיךָ:

angry . . . pleased An example of merism, the polarity expressing totality; that is, in any mood, as the whim strikes them.

maim The verb may mean either “to spay,” from Hebrew *akar*, “sterile,” as in Deuteronomy 7:14; or, more likely here, “to hamstring,” that is, to cripple a beast by severing the tendons of its hind legs.¹²

According to Genesis 34:28f., the cattle in Shechem were not mutilated but carried off as spoil. Jacob’s reproach, therefore, may refer to some other acts of cruelty perpetrated by these two tribes, the record of which has not been preserved. The difficulty of identifying the atrocities led some ancient versions, such as the Targums, Aquila, Symmachus, and Peshitta, as well as some medieval exegetes (Mid. Lek. Tov, Ibn Ezra, Ramban) to treat *shor* as *shur*, “wall,” and to understand its accompanying verb as meaning the tearing down of the city walls. The verb seems to be used in this sense in Zephaniah 2:4.

7. *Cursed be their anger* The curse is applied to the anger but actually refers to those who display it. The content of the curse is the loss of the independence and territorial integrity of these two tribes. Their future condition is explained in terms of the punitive ban decreed upon their original ancestors.

I will . . . Presumably, it is Jacob who pronounces their fate. The use of “Jacob . . . Israel” to designate the nation reflects later usage (cf. v. 16).

JUDAH (vv. 8–12)

In striking contrast to the preceding, Judah is lavishly praised and blessed: His preeminence is to be acknowledged by his brothers; he possesses (or will possess) lionlike strength; his hegemony is to be long lasting; and his territory is extraordinarily fertile.

The slow, almost imperceptible, rise of Judah has already been subtly insinuated into the Joseph story (see Comment to 37:26). Here it receives formal recognition and confirmation. In the wilderness Judah is, by far, the largest tribe: its population increases during the wanderings, as shown by the censuses of Numbers 1:26 and 26:22. The tribe encamps in front of the Tent of Meeting and heads the march (Num. 2:3,9; 10:14). Its chieftain is the first to bring gifts for the Tabernacle (Num. 7:12), and its representative is listed first among those designated to apportion the land (Num. 34:19).

The undisputed hegemony of Judah was not always taken for granted, as is clear from Deuteronomy 33:7 and from the relative unimportance of Judah during the period of the judges. Judah provides no important judge, and it is ignored by Deborah (Judg. 5). Only in Saul’s day does the tribe begin to emerge from its isolation; it gains hegemony over Israel in the time of David.

The Testament of Jacob can only have in mind this latter period. The language of the blessing is obscure, and the meaning of some words and phrases quite uncertain.

8. *You . . . to you* That is, to you alone, in contrast to the others.

shall praise With rare exception,¹³ this verb is reserved for praise of God. Its use here is for purposes of word play on the name Judah (*yehudah*–*yodukhah*; cf. 29:35).

your foes Judah was constantly beset by the Philistines on the west, by Amalekites in the Negeb, and by Edomites to the east. Moses, in his farewell blessing, asks for divine help against the foes of Judah (Deut. 33:7). For a long time, Judah was isolated from the northern tribes by Canaanite enclaves and was forced to expand southward.

9Judah is a lion's whelp;
 On prey, my son, have you grown.
 He crouches, lies down like a lion,
 Like the king of beasts—who dare rouse him?
 10The scepter shall not depart from Judah,
 Nor the ruler's staff from between his feet;
 So that tribute shall come to him
 And the homage of peoples be his.

9 גֹּדַר אַרְיֵה יְהוּדָה
 מִטְרַף בְּנֵי עֲלִיָּת
 כָּרַע רֶבֶץ כְּאַרְיֵה
 וּכְלָבִיא מִי יִקְיָמוּ:
 10 לֹא יִסּוּד שִׁבְט מִיְהוּדָה
 וּמַחְקֵק מִבֵּין רַגְלָיו
 עַד כִּי־בֹא שִׁילֹה
 וְלֹא יִקְהֶת עַמִּים:

hand . . . on the nape . . . The image is of the enemies turning their backs in flight but being seized by the nape before they can escape.¹⁴

Your father's sons The contrast with Isaac's blessing in 27:29, "your mother's sons," is explained by the fact that Isaac was monogamous, whereas Jacob had four wives and wished to indicate that all the tribes would acknowledge Judah's hegemony. Possibly, the blessing is meant to offset the note of 38:1, which reported that Judah left (lit. "went down from") his brothers.¹⁵

9. a lion's whelp A metaphor of strength, daring, and unassailability. In Moses' blessing both Gad and Dan are so compared, while Balaam applies the image to the people of Israel as a whole.

The lion is one of the most frequently mentioned animals in the Bible and is referred to by six different names. Under the influence of this verse, the "lion of Judah" became a favorite motif in Jewish art and acquired messianic associations.¹⁶

have you grown Hebrew *'aliyta*. Compare Ezekiel 19:3: "She raised (Heb. *va-ta'al*) up one of her cubs, / He became a great beast." The reference is to the heroic and expansionist campaigns of David, as noted by Rashi and Radak. Hebrew *'aliyta* may also be taken in its usual sense of "going up," an image of the lion returning to its mountain lair after stalking and running down its prey. There may be still another level of interpretation embedded in the somewhat ambiguous syntax, allowing one to read *mi-teref beni*, "from the prey of my son." This suggests an allusion to 37:33 and 44:28: "Joseph was torn (*tarof toraf*) by a beast." Judah's rise was consequent upon Joseph's misfortune. This rendering is given in Genesis Rabba 98:12 and 99:9.

10. The meaning of this celebrated but difficult verse has been much disputed.

The scepter Hebrew *shevet* serves as an emblem of authority and sovereignty in several texts.¹⁷ The general idea is that Judah will always enjoy hegemony over the other tribes. It provided the royal house of David.

the ruler's staff Hebrew *mehokek* has this meaning in Numbers 21:18 and Psalms 60:9 and 108:9, and it provides a perfect parallel to "scepter." The term may also be translated "leader, ruler," as in Deuteronomy 33:21, Judges 5:14, and Isaiah 33:22, in which case the preceding *shevet* would be an instance of metonymy, the substitution of an attribute for the name of the thing intended, namely, the one who wields the scepter. Many early and medieval commentators derived *mehokek* from the root *h-k-k*, meaning "to incise, inscribe," and understood it as a term for a scribe.¹⁸

from between his feet Taken literally, the phrase conjures up a picture of a ruler holding the staff of office between his legs when seated in formal session. This favors "mace" for *mehokek*. However, a widely held view sees here a euphemism for the sexual parts and prefers the meaning "offspring, descendants," in which case *mehokek* would be better rendered "leader."¹⁹

So that Hebrew *'ad ki* is rare and is otherwise used only in narrative prose to express the leading up to a climactic passage.²⁰ The present usage is exceptional in that it takes a verb in the imperfect and refers to the future, making its signification uncertain. It seems to mean that Judah will exercise hegemony over the tribes for a period of time leading up to some climactic event.

tribute shall come to him Hebrew *yavo' shiloh* is wholly obscure; neither the subject of the verb nor the meaning of *shiloh* is clear. The present rendering, that of the Yalkut and Lekah Tov, takes *shiloh* as a combination of *shai*, "tribute," and *loh*, "to him." Several ancient versions understand it as in late Hebrew *shello*, "that which belongs to him," that is, until he obtains the monarchy. Rashbam

¹¹He tethers his ass to a vine,
His ass's foal to a choice vine;
He washes his garment in wine,
His robe in blood of grapes.
¹²His eyes are darker than wine;
His teeth are whiter than milk.

אֶסְרֵי לִגְפֹן עֵידָה 11
וְלִשְׂרָקָה בְּנֵי אֶתְנֹו
כַּבֵּס בְּיַיִן לִבְשׁוֹ
וּבְדָם-עֵנָבִים סוּתָה:
תְּכַלִּילִי עֵינַיִם מִיַּיִן 12
וּלְבָבִי-שֵׁנִים מִחֶלֶב: פ

v. 11. עֵידָה ק' סוּתָה: ק'

identifies the word with the city of Shiloh, a very ancient cultic center in Israel situated in the territory of Ephraim. The specific historic reference would be the defection of the ten tribes from Judah with the resultant division of the kingdom, announced by the prophet Ahijah of Shiloh. Judah's hegemony over all Israel will last until the secession of the north.

An early tradition, found in texts from Qumran, in the Targums, and in rabbinic literature, sees in *shiloh* a messianic title, although no biblical passage supports this. It has even been noted that the numerical value of the consonants *y-b-ʿ sh-y-l-h*, “Shiloh will come,” is equal to that of *mashiah*, “messiah”: 358.²¹

None of the many interpretations of *shiloh* is without objection, and the term remains an enigma, though the present translation seems to be the most acceptable.

homage Hebrew *yikkhat* occurs elsewhere only in Proverbs 30:17. Its meaning is assured by context and by an Arabic cognate.²²

peoples Either the other tribes, that is, “kinsmen,” or, more likely, an allusion to foreign peoples,²³ probably the subject peoples of the Davidic empire.

11. The blessed fertility of the tribal territory of Judah is symbolized by the abundance of vines and wine. This is a common biblical figure of divine favor and of prosperity. The vine was one of the indigenous characteristic products of the Land of Israel (Deut. 8:8), and the region around Hebron in Judah was particularly noted for viticulture.²⁴

He tethers . . . The image is problematic because an ass would soon destroy the vine to which it is tied. The idea, apparently, is that the luxuriance and productivity of the vine will be so great that the destructive proclivities of the ass²⁵ will be of no significance. This is hyperbolic language, as Radak noted.

choice vine Hebrew *sorekah*. A place named Wadi Sorek, in the territory of Judah, seems to have been located in the region of Timnah, which was rich in vineyards. The region figures in the story of Judah and Tamar (Gen. 38:12).²⁶

He washes his garment in wine This extraordinary figure may be simply another hyperbole for the abundance of wine, or it may poetically relate to the stained garments of those engaged in the manufacture of wine, as mentioned in Isaiah 63:2ff.²⁷ Another possibility is that we have here a reference to the fact that prominent Judean families were engaged in the weaving and dyeing industry, as recorded in 1 Chronicles 4:21. In the excavations at modern Tell Beit Mirsim, in the territory of Judah, a major and well-organized dyeing and weaving industry was uncovered. In this case, either “wine” was used as a poetic term for red-colored dye, or wine was actually used as an ingredient of dyestuffs.

blood of grapes A poetic term for wine (cf. Deut. 32:14). “Blood” (Heb. *dam*) is also used in Akkadian (*dāmu*) for red wine. In Ugaritic *yn*, “wine,” is paralleled with *dm ʿsm*, “blood of trees” (5I.III.43f.; cf. IV.38).

12. darker than wine . . . whiter than milk The phrases express an ideal of beauty: sparkling eyes²⁸ and shining white teeth.

ZEBULUN (v. 13)

The usual order, Issachar-Zebulun, is here reversed. This is strange because, according to the birth narrative of Genesis 30:17–20, Issachar was the older of the two and he generally appears first in the

tribal lists. Yet the Blessing of Moses in Deuteronomy 33:18 also reverses the sequence, reflecting some genuine historic tradition. One cannot simply say that Deuteronomy 33 is dependent on Genesis 49, for two other texts also give Zebulun precedence over his brother tribe. These are the narratives detailing the commission for the division of the land in Numbers 34:25f. and the drawing of lots for the allocation of territory in Joshua 19:16–17. Very likely, therefore, the Testament of Jacob relates to a time when Zebulun was in ascendancy. Certainly, the content of the sayings about them in both poems—Genesis 49 and Deuteronomy 33—suggests that Issachar was the less energetic of the two tribes, and this impression is reinforced by the Song of Deborah, which gives high praise to Zebulun for its contribution to the national victory, mentioning it before Issachar and citing it a second time (Judg. 5:14,18; cf. 4:6,10), the only tribe to be so honored. Zebulun also joined Gideon's battle against the Midianites (Judg. 6:35), and its importance in the time of David is illustrated by the fact that it contributed to David's armies the largest military contingent of all of the western tribes (1 Chron. 12:33).

Another problem arising out of verse 13 is the portrayal of Zebulun as living along the seacoast²⁹ and being involved in shipping. The Blessing of Moses also credits Zebulun (together with Issachar) with drawing wealth from the sea (Deut. 33:19). The boundaries of Zebulun are delimited in Joshua 19:10–16, and it is clear that the tribe occupied inland territory, being blocked from the sea and from Phoenicia by the tribe of Asher. Apart from this specific problem of Zebulun's boundaries, there is also the general question of Israel's littoral and seafaring interests. In the Song of Deborah, in Judges 5:17, Dan is also said to “linger by the ships” and Asher to live “at the seacoast and . . . at his harbors.” Yet seafaring and fishing never played an important role in the economy of the Land of Israel. The coast below the Carmel has no bays or natural harbors, and the dune sands in various places meant that roads had to be located at an inconvenient distance from the coastline, a considerable part of which was occupied by the Philistines. Above the Carmel, where several natural harbors existed, the region was largely the preserve of the Phoenicians. The general inland orientation of Israel is demonstrated by Solomon's desire to build a fleet at Elath on the Red Sea; he was forced to import manpower and technology from Phoenicia, as told in 1 Kings 9:26f. and 10:5,22.

The associations of some tribes with the sea can probably be explained in two ways. It is quite likely that Philistines and Phoenicians employed Israelite labor. Coastal cities of the Near East always featured mixed populations, so that the above-cited verses may refer not to Israelite occupation of the area but, rather, to the presence of considerable numbers of Israelites engaged as stevedores, in the servicing of ships, and in commerce (cf. 2 Sam. 24:6–7). Another possibility, complementary to the first, lies in the Israelite exploitation of convenient anchorage sites for very small ships at the points where more important wadis drain into the sea. Excavations at Abu Hawam on Wadi Kishon, at Tell Qasile on the Yarkon, and at Tell Mor on Wadi Lachish have revealed examples of this practice.

the seashore Hebrew *hof yamim*, literally “shore of seas.” The plural, found elsewhere only in Judges 5:17, is probably a poetic form referring to the Mediterranean.

a haven for ships Hebrew *hof 'oniyot*, literally “a shore of / for ships,” *hof* being used in two different senses here, the second unparalleled elsewhere.³⁰

Sidon The mention of Sidon need not be taken literally as referring to the port city of that name high up in Phoenicia, about 25 miles (40 km.) north of Tyre. The Bible often uses Sidon as a generalized term for Phoenicia(ns).³¹ The same tendency is found in Homer and, in fact, follows the usage of the Phoenicians themselves to whom the title “King of (the) Sidon(ians)” meant all the Phoenicians including both Tyre and Sidon. The list in Genesis 10:15 (= 1 Chron. 1:13) that makes Sidon “the first-born of Canaan” simply testifies to the preeminence of the city that gave its name to Phoenicia in general. It was called Sidon even when Tyre was the dominant city-state of all southern Phoenicia.

ISSACHAR (vv. 14–15)

It is quite apparent from the Books of Joshua (15:63; 16:10; 17:16) and Judges (1:19–34) that during the wars of conquest, and for a long time afterwards, the invading Israelites were unable to dislodge the Canaanites from many of their strongholds in the plains and lowlands. The epigram relating to Issachar seems to be connected with this situation. The tribe is not even mentioned in the inventory of Judges 1, which means that it played a very minor, if not inglorious, role in the wars. Here it is

13 Zebulun shall dwell by the seashore;
 He shall be a haven for ships,
 And his flank shall rest on Sidon.
 14 Issachar is a strong-boned ass,
 Crouching among the sheepfolds.
 15 When he saw how good was security,
 And how pleasant was the country,
 He bent his shoulder to the burden,
 And became a toiling serf.

13 זְבוּלֹן לְחוֹף יָמִים יִשְׁכֵּן
 וְהוּא לְחוֹף אֲנִיּוֹת
 וְיָרְכָתוּ עַל־צִידוֹן: ס
 14 יִשְׁשַׁכֵּר חֲמֹר גָּרֵם
 רֹבֵץ בֵּין הַמְּשָׁפְתִים:
 15 וַיִּרְא מְנוּחָה כִּי טוֹב
 וְאֵת־הָאָרֶץ כִּי נְעֻמָּה
 וַיִּט שִׁכְמוֹ לְסִבְלָה
 וַיְהִי לְמַס־עֲבָד: ס

chided for passively submitting to servitude as the price of peace with its neighbors. Implied in the taunt is a bitter play on the name Issachar. In the birth narrative of this son, this is explained, by popular etymology, as deriving from the Hebrew stem *s-k-r*, “to hire,” and is taken to mean “man of reward” (see Comment to 30:16,18). There the name is intended to be understood as “hireling.” The Blessing of Moses similarly specifies the withdrawn nature of this tribe, but not in a disparaging way. By the time of Deborah, the Canaanites had become sufficiently weakened for Issachar to be emboldened to rally to the cause of the northern tribes. For this it received the praise of the prophetess (Judg. 5:15).

14. a strong-boned ass Hebrew *hamor garem* is unique and obscure. The present rendering is based on identifying the second word with the noun *gerem*, Aramaic *gram*, “bone,”³² used adjectivally, “bony,” in the sense of “strong-limbed.” The characterization would then imply a criticism of the tribe for placing its strength at the service of the Canaanites. A different tradition is preserved by the Samaritan reading *hamor gerim*, “an ass of foreigners,” that is, one pressed into the service of alien peoples. Some of the ancient versions appear to have reacted to the negative associations of the ass with stupidity and stubbornness in their respective cultures and so paraphrased or changed the original. Thus, the Peshitta has *gabra ganbara*, “a strong man”; Targum Onkelos renders *attir benikhsin*, “rich in possessions”; Targum Jonathan interprets *hamir beurya’ ve-shevet takif*, “laden with the Law and a strong tribe.” The Septuagint, apparently reading *hamad* for *hamor*, presents “Issachar desired that which is good.” It would seem that the phrase *hamor garem* is an ancient idiom still awaiting elucidation through some epigraphic find.

Rabbinic legend found in Genesis Rabba 72:4 and 99:11 has Issachar engaged in the study of the Torah while Zebulun busied himself with commerce and maintained his brother (cf. Deut. 33:18).

Crouching among the sheepfolds That is, inactive, content to enjoy its safety at the expense of its freedom. The term rendered “sheepfolds” (Heb. *mishpetayim*) occurs elsewhere only in Judges 5:16 (cf. Pss. 68:14): “Why then did you stay among the *mishpetayim*, / And listen as they pipe for the flocks?” The context there is likewise an accusation of tribal indifference to the wars of Israel. The meaning of the word, however, is by no means certain. The stem *sh-f-t* can mean “to set the pot on the fire,” as in 2 Kings 4:38 and Ezekiel 24:3, and *mishpetayim* may therefore be a word for an open hearth or fireplace around which the shepherds would gather with their flocks for food, rest, and amusement. Less likely philologically is the interpretation “saddlebags,” suggested by Radak. This refers to the pannier, or pair of bags, carried over the back of a beast of burden and hanging on either side. Another possibility is “defense enclosures” for animals. This rests on archaeological, rather than philological, evidence.³³

15. security Hebrew *menuhah*, literally “resting place” (cf. Num. 10:33), is used in the sense of “haven, settled home,” as the parallel *ha-arets* (“country”) shows.³⁴

good . . . pleasant The territory of the tribe lay in a fertile plateau in Lower Galilee.

to the burden Hebrew *s-v-l* means “to carry a burden.” In Psalms 81:7 and Nehemiah 4:11, the noun *sevel* is a basket carried on the shoulder in heavy corvée labor.³⁵ In Akkadian texts from Mari and Amarna, *sablum* is used of corvée workers, and Hebrew *sevel* is also used of corvée work in 1 Kings 11:28.

¹⁶Dan shall govern his people,
As one of the tribes of Israel.

דָּן יִדְּיִן עַמּוֹ 16
כְּאַחַד שְׁבֵטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

a toiling serf Hebrew *mas* ‘*oved*, a combination that also appears in Joshua 16:10 and 1 Kings 9:21. Otherwise, the phrase is simply *mas*.³⁶ It is difficult to differentiate between the two forms, for a comparison of 1 Kings 9:21 with 2 Chronicles 8:8 shows that both refer to the corvée. In Akkadian texts from Mari, Alalakh, and Amarna, *massu* similarly occurs in the sense of “corvée.” This type of enforced hard labor imposed upon a subservient people is well illustrated by the experience of the Israelites in Egypt: “So they set taskmasters (Heb. *sarei missim*) over them to oppress them with forced labor (Heb. *siyotam*)” (Exod. 1:11). The Amarna document is of particular interest because it derives from the prince of Megiddo and relates to the employment of corvée workers (Akk. *amilūti massa*) in the town of Shunem, which lay within the territory allotted to Issachar (Josh. 19:18). It would seem that until the final overthrow of the Canaanite city-states in the time of Deborah, the tribe had been content to perform corvée labor for the local overlords in return for a quiet existence.

DAN (vv. 16–17)

These two verses may well be unconnected, each alluding to a different situation. The first deals with Dan’s status among the tribes of Israel, the second with its position vis-à-vis its enemies. Our meager knowledge of the history of this tribe and the elliptical language used here greatly complicate our understanding of the aphorisms and make it difficult to identify the historic situations behind them.

Dan is the first of the concubine tribes to be addressed. This implies a position of importance, a conclusion reinforced by its also being the only such to be allocated territory between the Leah and Rachel tribes. Furthermore, in the wilderness censuses it is actually the second largest tribe, its adult male population numbering over 60,000 (Num. 2:26; 26:43).

There is much evidence, however, that during the settlement period Dan was a small tribe in a precarious position. The tribal genealogies of the Torah assign it only a single clan (Gen. 46:23—Hushim; Num. 26:42—Shuham), part of which seems to have been absorbed by the neighboring Benjaminites (cf. 1 Chron. 7:12; 8:8). The genealogies of Chronicles ignore the tribe altogether. The stories about the Danite blasphemer in the wilderness whose father was an Egyptian (Lev. 24:11), about Samson’s easy relationships and intermarriages with Philistines (Judg. 14:1ff.; 16:4), and about the Danite master craftsman Hiram-abi whose father was a Tyrian (2 Chron. 2:12f., but contrast 1 Kings 7:13f.) all point to a certain amount of intermingling of blood between Danites and neighboring peoples. Very significantly, the Book of Joshua does not define the borders of the tribe. These are inferred from those of the neighboring tribes, Ephraim to the north, Benjamin to the east, and Judah to the south. All we have is a list of cities allocated to Dan (Josh. 19:40–48), but some of these, such as Zorah, Eshtaol, and Ekron, are earlier assigned to Judah (Josh. 15:33, 11, 45). There are no reports of the Danites having captured any of their allotted cities. In fact, the term “the Camp of Dan”—Hebrew *mahaneh dan*—in Judges 13:25 (cf. 18:12) shows that they occupied a fortified camp, not a true settlement, between the two Canaanite cities of Zorah and Eshtaol. All attempts on the part of the Danites to settle in the Valley of Aijalon and in the Shephelah were unsuccessful, and they finally despaired of gaining their originally assigned territory and migrated northward, as told in Joshua 19:47 and in Judges 1:34f. and chapter 18. Biblical tradition thereafter presupposes the presence of Dan in the north. The Song of Deborah, Judges 5:17, censures Dan for not participating in the war of the northern tribes against the Canaanites (cf. Deut. 33:27).

The Testament of Jacob can be interpreted as referring either to the premigration period or to events after the settlement in the north.

16. shall govern Hebrew *yadin* is a word play on the name Dan (see Comment to 30:6), so that “his people” would mean “himself”: The tribe of Dan will maintain its independence like any other tribe, despite its tribulations and failures. However, *yadin* more frequently means “to vindicate,” and the object could refer to all Israel. In this case, the allusion could be to the exploits of Samson against the Philistine oppressors, which, though they are generally more of the nature of personal vengeance, acquire national significance.³⁷

the tribes of Israel This is the first usage of the phrase (cf. v. 28; see above, Introduction to chapter).

¹⁷Dan shall be a serpent by the road,
A viper by the path,
That bites the horse's heels
So that his rider is thrown backward.
¹⁸I wait for Your deliverance, O LORD!

יְהִי־דָן נָחֵשׁ עַל־יַדְרֹךְ ¹⁷
שֹׁפֵי־אֶרֶץ
הַנֶּשֶׁךְ עֵקֵב־סוּס
וַיִּפֹּל רֹכֵבוֹ אָחוֹר:
לִישׁוּעָתְךָ קִנִּיתִי יְהוָה: חֲמִישִׁי ¹⁸

17. viper The unique Hebrew *shefifon* is probably to be identified with the horned cerastes, which buries itself in the sand, especially in the hollows made by camel's hoofs, and feeds on rodents and scavenger birds attracted by grains and particles of food left by the Bedouin along caravan routes. It has a venom-injecting spinelike scale above each eye that kills its prey on contact, almost instantaneously. However, its poison is not powerful enough to be fatal to a camel or a horse. It will bite its heel if it crosses its path and cause the beast to rear suddenly and violently, thereby throwing its rider (cf. 3:15).

The image may allude to the form of guerrilla warfare to which the tribe of Dan was forced to resort in its struggle for survival against its neighbors during the period of settlement. It could also refer to the fact that Dan, whether in the Shephelah or in its northern relocation, lay alongside important caravan routes and may have engaged in highway robbery.

horse's . . . rider The use of the horse for riding, as opposed to draft purposes, first appears in the fourteenth century B.C.E. (see Comment to 47:17), but it was not common. The horse does not figure among the livestock of the patriarchs. Only around 1000 B.C.E. did mounted cavalry appear on the battlefields in Syria and Canaan. Since Hebrew *rokhev*, "rider," can also be used of a charioteer, as in Exodus 15:2 and Jeremiah 51:21, the likely reference is to Canaanite chariots, which for a long time constituted the primary obstacle to Israelite penetration into the lowlands and caused the migration of the Danites (Josh. 17:18; Judg. 1:19; 4:3).

A PRAYER (v. 18)

The use of the first person, as in verses 1,3–4,6–7, and 9, leaves no doubt that the worshipper is Jacob. The formulation corresponds to well-established liturgical patterns.³⁸ The meaning is clear: the patriarch suddenly calls for divine deliverance. Such a prayer would only originate in a situation of danger. What, then, is its context here? It might be a personal prayer for the strength to finish the Testament, at a moment of physical weakness. It might reflect the deep disappointment felt at the fate of Samson (Judg. 15) if the oracle about Dan really refers to him. This explanation is given in Genesis Rabba 98:19f. and 99:12. The prayer could also be invoked by the discouraging experiences of the tribe of Dan in its struggle for a territorial foothold.

GAD (v. 19)

This tribe had its territory east of the Jordan.³⁹ Its boundaries are defined in the Book of Joshua. However, for most of its history, Gad was engaged in a series of wars with its neighbors, Ammonites (Judg. 11), Moabites (Mesha Inscription, lines 10–13), and Arameans (1 Kings 22:3; 2 Kings 10:33). Its members acquired a reputation as fighting warriors (Deut. 33:20; 1 Chron. 5:18 and 12:8) and, doubtless, the Testament of Jacob reflects this. No particular historic situation can be pinpointed as the background to this aphorism.

Gad . . . raided The Hebrew contains a play on the name (see Comment to 30:11); *gad* is associated with *gedud*, "a troop," and the verb formed from it, *yegudenu*, "shall be raided."⁴⁰

ASHER (v. 20)

This tribe settled in Western Galilee between the Carmel and Phoenicia (Josh. 19:24–31). The area was famed for its fertility (cf. Deut. 33:24) and lay within the Canaanite-Phoenician sphere of political and commercial activity. Asher did not succeed in capturing the most important cities in its allotted territory, as noted in Judges 1:31f., and seems to have thrown in its lot with the local city-states from

19Gad shall be raided by raiders,
 But he shall raid at their heels.
 20Asher's bread shall be rich,
 And he shall yield royal dainties.
 21Naphtali is a hind let loose,
 Which yields lovely fawns.

19 גַּד גָּדוּד יְגוּדֵנוּ
 וְהוּא יִגְדַּע עַקְבֵּי: ס
 20 מֵאֲשֵׁר שֶׁמֶנֶה לַחֲמוּ
 וְהוּא יִתֵּן מַעֲדָנֵי מַלְךְ: ס
 21 נַפְתָּלִי אֵילָה שְׁלֵחָה
 הַנִּתְּן אֲמֵרֵי שֹׁפָר: ס

which it derived its prosperity. The Testament would thus refer to the period of the judges before the final defeat of the Canaanites in the north under Deborah’s inspiring leadership.

Asher The name, which means “fortune, happiness” (Gen. 30:13), contains a veiled allusion to the prosperity of the tribe.⁴¹

bread Hebrew *lehem* can mean food in general, as in Psalms 136:25.

royal dainties The phrase may either be figurative, “delicacies fit for a king,” or literal, that is, Asher serviced the petty Canaanite kingdoms.

NAPHTALI (v. 21)

The territory of this tribe lay in Upper Galilee and ran parallel to the Jordan from the south shore of the Sea of Galilee to an unspecified line in the north beyond Lake Hulch, with its western boundary bordering on Asher (Josh. 19:32–39). Little is known of its early history, except that it was forced to accept a symbiotic relationship with the Canaanites until it felt strong enough to subjugate them (Judg. 1:33). It played a glorious role in the war of Deborah. The Israelite commander-in-chief came from Naphtali (Judg. 4:6; 5:18). The aphorism here is obscure both because the language yields many interpretations and because none can easily be related to the sparse data available about the tribe and its history.

a hind In Proverbs 5:19, Hebrew *'ayyalah* is a symbol of beauty. In Psalms 18:34 and Habakkuk 3:19 it typifies fleet-footedness. Naphtali is the only tribe compared to a female animal, but the significance of the fact is not apparent. The Hebrew consonants can also be read *'e(y)lah*, “a terebinth,” which is the way the Septuagint took it.

let loose Hebrew *sheluhah*, “unrestrained,” is used of a beast in Exodus 22:4 and Leviticus 16:22. The stem is also used of one sent on a mission, as in Proverbs 17:11 and Obadiah 1, as well as of the spreading shoots or branches of a tree, as in Isaiah 16:8, Jeremiah 17:8, and Psalms 80:12.

lovely fawns Hebrew *'imerei shafer*, a unique phrase, can be variously translated. The present rendering is based on a word meaning “lamb” in many Semitic languages. The reference could then be to Naphtali being quick to pay tribute of sheep to its Canaanite overlords or to the beauty, openness, and fruitfulness of its tribal territory. Another possibility is to translate “beautiful words”; that is, a swift runner from Naphtali brings good tidings of victory in Deborah’s war against the Canaanites. Yet a third interpretation renders “goodly boughs/ crest of a tree.” This compares the tribe to a terebinth with spreading branches and a lovely crest.⁴²

JOSEPH (vv. 22–26)

The Testament to Joseph is of extraordinary length, equaled only, and significantly, by that to Judah. Lavish blessing is showered upon Joseph, the name here standing for Ephraim and Manasseh together (see below). The language is enigmatic and allusive, and the meaning is often uncertain. Echoes of the Testament are to be found in the Blessing of Moses (Deut. 33:13–16).

There seem to be four themes in the verses directed to Joseph: the attributes of the tribes (v. 22), an historical allusion (vv. 23f.), divine protection (vv. 24f.), and blessings of prosperity (vv. 25f.). This is the only Testament that does not commence with the name of the tribe. This stylistic variance may be intended to draw attention to the special importance of the Joseph tribes.

²²Joseph is a wild ass,
 A wild ass by a spring
 —Wild colts on a hillside.
²³Archers bitterly assailed him;
 They shot at him and harried him.
²⁴Yet his bow stayed taut,
 And his arms were made firm
 By the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob—
 There, the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel—

בֶּן פֶּרֶת יוֹסֵף ²²
 בֶּן פֶּרֶת עַל־עֵינַן
 בְּנוֹת צְעָדָה עַל־שׁוּר:
 וַיִּמְרְדוּ וְרִבּוּ ²³
 וַיִּשְׁטְמֵהוּ בְּעַלְיֵי חַצְיָם:
 וַתֵּשֶׁב בְּאֵיתָן קִשְׁתּוֹ ²⁴
 וַיִּפְּזוּ זְרָעֵי יָדָיו
 מִיַּד־אֲבִיר יַעֲקֹב
 מִשָּׁם רֵעָה אֲבֹן יִשְׂרָאֵל:

22. Joseph The Blessing of Moses similarly uses the name “Joseph” for the two tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh; but such usage is rare. Otherwise, the name designates the entire northern kingdom of Israel. The two tribes are known as “the House of Joseph” or “the sons of Joseph.”⁴³

a wild ass . . . A wild ass Literally, “a wild ass is Joseph, A wild ass by a spring”—an example of anaphora (see Comment to v. 2).

wild ass Hebrew *ben porat* is probably a word play on “Ephraim,” the more important of the two Joseph tribes, for a member of the tribe was designated *’efrati* (*’prti*).

The present translation takes *ben* as signifying a class or quality and *porat* as a feminine poetic form of *pere’*. The parallel clause *banot tsa’adah* is understood as the Hebrew equivalent of Arabic *banāt sa’adat*, “wild colts.”⁴⁴ This rendering has the virtue of maintaining the pattern of the figurative use of animal names for the tribes. In this particular case, the “wild ass” allusion (see Comment to 16:2) may be to the freedom and independence of the Joseph tribes, which occupied an area that had previously been sparsely populated, as is clearly implied in Joshua 17:14–18.

spring . . . hillside Hebrew *’ayin, shur* may well be word play concealing a reference to the Ishmaelites who sold Joseph to Egypt, as related in Genesis 37:25,28. “The spring (*’ayin*) on the road to Shur” plays an important role in the birth narrative about Ishmael (16:7), who is also described as “a wild ass” (16:12). Further, the following two verses here refer to hostile archers, and Ishmael was indeed “a bowman” (21:20). It is also worth noting that both *’ayin* and *shur* are terms of “seeing,”⁴⁵ and Hagar, mother of Ishmael, referred to the “God of Seeing,” who reassured her at “the Well of the Living One Who sees me” (16:13f.).

hillside A poetic extension of the otherwise attested meaning, “wall.”⁴⁶

23. Scripture nowhere else records attacks by archers upon Joseph. Unless this refers to some unreported episode in his life or to attacks on Ephraim and Manasseh by neighboring tribes or Canaanite armies, the phraseology may be figurative. It could allude to the Ishmaelites (see above), to the hostility of Joseph’s brothers, or to the slanderous accusations of Potiphar’s wife with their bitter aftereffects. The figure of slander as an arrow is well attested.⁴⁷

24. The Hebrew text is difficult. In the present state of our knowledge, this translation is the best that can be wrested from it. The idea seems to be that Joseph remained steadfast in the face of adversity and drew his strength from God, who championed his cause.⁴⁸

Mighty One of Jacob Hebrew *’avir ya’akov*, a rare divine title, appearing elsewhere only four times, always in poetic texts. It corresponds to the Akkadian divine title *bel abāri*, “endowed with strength,” and is to be distinguished from *’abbir*, which is used of stallions, bulls, and warriors.⁴⁹

Jacob . . . Israel The ambiguity as to whether the patriarch or the people of Israel is intended is probably deliberate.⁵⁰ See the Introduction to this chapter.

There Hebrew *mi-sham*, literally “from there.” The patriarch may have pointed heavenward. The Peshitta reading *mi-shem*, “by the name of,” reflects the idea that the “Name” of God expresses the essence of His being from which flows help and salvation.⁵¹ Although this reading has been widely accepted as original, the biblical usage is invariably *be-shem*.

the Shepherd For the common image of God as a shepherd, see Comment to 48:15.

25The God of your father who helps you,
 And Shaddai who blesses you
 With blessings of heaven above,
 Blessings of the deep that couches below,
 Blessings of the breast and womb.
 26The blessings of your father
 Surpass the blessings of my ancestors,
 To the utmost bounds of the eternal hills.
 May they rest on the head of Joseph,
 On the brow of the elect of his brothers.

25 מֵאֵל אָבִיךָ וַיַּעֲזֹרְךָ
 וְאֵת שְׂדֵי וַיְבָרְכֶךָ
 בְּרִכַּת שָׁמַיִם מֵעַל
 בְּרִכַּת תְּהוֹם רֹבֶצֶת תַּחַת
 בְּרִכַּת שְׂדֵיִם וְרִחַם:
 26 בְּרִכַּת אָבִיךָ
 גְּבֹרוּ עַל־בְּרִכַּת הַזֵּרִי
 עַד־תְּאוֹת גְּבֻעַת עוֹלָם
 תִּהְיֶינָה לְרֹאשׁ יוֹסֵף
 וּלְקַדְקֹד גְּזִיר אֶחָיו: פ ששי

the Rock of Israel Hebrew *'even*, literally “stone,” is nowhere else used as a divine name or in association with God. The present translation is that of *tsur*, “rock,” a frequent epithet of God,⁵² expressing strength, permanence, and protection. Unlike *tsur*, *'even* does not appear as a component of proper names. It is possible that “Stone of Israel” may have been a very ancient title that disappeared early and that might have derived from the traditions about Jacob setting up a stone pillar at Bethel, as reported in 28:18,22 and 35:14. This suggestion is bolstered by the use of the epithet “God of . . . your father” on that occasion (28:13) and by the title El Shaddai associated with the revelation there (35:11; 48:3). All these terms occur here in the Testament of Jacob.

25. The Testament to Joseph now shifts from the miseries of the past to the promise of the future. Underlying the blessing is the concept of a God who has a personal relationship with the individual and who, at the same time, is a cosmic, universal deity in sovereign control of all the forces of nature.

The God of your father This title stresses the continuity of the generations, the unbroken chain of religious tradition that alone makes the dying patriarch’s blessing meaningful and effective. Hebrew *'el 'avikha* is unique; otherwise, *'elohim* is used in this compound. The reason for the exception is that the composite epithet *'el shaddai* is here split up into its components for purposes of poetic parallelism (cf. Num. 24:4,16).

blessings These consist of rain and dew and abundance of water resources, all of which symbolize fruitfulness of the soil and the fecundity (= “breast and womb”) of animals and humans.

breast and womb The natural order (cf. Hos. 9:14) is here reversed for reasons of sound-harmony (Heb. *shamayim–shadayim; tehom–rahām*), and there is also an obvious word play between *shaddai* and *shadayim*.

the deep that couches below On Hebrew *tehom*, see Comment to 1:1. Here (cf. Deut. 33:13) it means the subterranean source of waters that rise to the earth’s surface. The language used is borrowed from a lost myth about a sea monster, another fragment of which is Habakkuk 3:10 (literally): “The deep gave forth its voice; it raised its hands on high.” This is another example of the biblical employment of mythic language purely as a literary convention, emptied of its original content.

26. According to the present rendering, the patriarch assures Joseph that the blessings he bestows on him immeasurably exceed what he himself had received from his forebears. This interpretation, however, depends upon a particular understanding of several unique and difficult words and phrases of uncertain meaning.

Surpass Hebrew *gavar 'al* is used elsewhere of the flood waters that “swelled upon” the earth, as in Genesis 7:19,24; of troops that “prevailed against” an enemy, as in 2 Samuel 11:23; and of God’s steadfast love being “great in respect of” the recipient, as in Psalms 103:11 and 117:2. Clearly, this last best fits the context, except that one would expect the object to be Joseph rather than the other blessings. Perhaps *'al* should here be taken as “in addition to,” as in Exodus 35:22 and Deuteronomy 22:6.

my ancestors Hebrew *horai* is so rendered based on postbiblical usage. However, the stem *h-r-h* in the Bible can only mean “to become pregnant” and is, of course, solely used in the feminine. Seeing that “mountain(s)” — “hill(s)” is a fixed pair of parallel terms in Hebrew poetry, occurring more than thirty times in that order, Rashbam is undoubtedly correct in connecting *horai* here with *har*, “mountain.” The Septuagint indeed reads here “ancient mountains,” joining the word to the following *‘ad*. The phrase *harere ‘ad*, “ancient mountains,” appears in Habakkuk 3:6 in parallel with *give‘ot ‘olam*, “eternal hills.” The Blessing of Moses to Joseph in Deuteronomy 33:15 employs the same imagery, though in variant form: “With the best from the ancient mountains, / And the bounty of hills immemorial. . . .” Therefore, it is best to render here, “the blessings of the ancient mountains.”

the utmost bounds Hebrew *ta’ava(t)h* is taken to be connected with a rare verbal form *teta’u* (Num. 34:7–8), apparently meaning “to draw a line, delineate.”⁵³ But this is itself uncertain (cf. Num. 34:10). Elsewhere, the noun means “desire” and is best translated here “desirable things, delights (cf. Gen. 3:6), bounty,” parallel to “blessings.” In light of the above analysis, the text may be translated: “Mighty are the blessings of your father, / In addition to the blessings of the ancient mountains, / The bounty of the eternal hills.”

on the head An example of synecdoche, the head representing the entire person.⁵⁴

head . . . brow Hebrew *ro’sh kodkod* (lit. “pate”) are a fixed pair of parallel terms in poetry.⁵⁵

the elect Rather, “leader.” Hebrew *nazir* may here be “one who wears the *nezer*,” the symbol of royal power, as in 2 Samuel 1:10 and 2 Kings 11:12.⁵⁶ Another tradition takes it in the sense of “separated,” a transferred use of its usual meaning, “Nazirite,” meaning the one who took vows of abstinence as detailed in Numbers 6:1–6. This refers to the early relationships between Joseph and his brothers. Since Hebrew *nezer* also means “the hair of the head” (Jer. 7:29)—the outward characteristic of the Nazirite, who is not permitted to cut his hair—a word play with *ro’sh* and *kodkod* is probably intended.

BENJAMIN (v. 27)

The picture of Benjamin drawn here is certainly not the same as the one that emerges from the Joseph story. Far from being a “ravenous wolf,” he is there the patriarch’s lamblike youngest son whom he is reluctant to let out of his sight. Clearly, the image in the Testament, which portrays the Benjaminites as warlike and predatory, is tribal and not individual.

The martial qualities of this small tribe are indeed well attested. The first judge-savior of Israel from Moabite oppression was Ehud the Benjaminite, mentioned in Judges 3:15, and the army of the tribe took part in the war of Deborah (Judg. 5:14). In a civil war, it is said to have mustered twenty-six thousand men armed with swords and seven hundred crack slingers and to have fought back savagely against the combined forces of the other tribes, so Judges 20:15,16,21,25. It provided skilled archers, men “valiant in battle,” says 1 Chronicles 8:40 and 12:2, and two of David’s heroes came from this tribe, according to 2 Samuel 23:27,29.

The historic explanation for the militancy of the Benjaminites is grounded in the geographical situation of its territory. Occupying a narrow strip of land separating the hill country of Judah to the south from the hill country of Ephraim to the north, it was so strategically located that the important north-south central highway, as well as a main east-west road leading to Transjordan, passed through it. As a result, the territory of Benjamin became an arena for wars. It is no accident that Israelite opposition to Philistine oppression was centered in that tribe (1 Sam. 10:5; 13:3) and that Saul, first king of Israel and warrior-liberator, came from Benjamin (1 Sam. 9:1).⁵⁷

The Testament of Jacob here reflects this general historic situation. It is quite likely that Benjaminites preyed upon the caravans that passed along the trade routes within their territory, an activity echoed in the text.

morning . . . evening The two contrasting terms express continual action (cf. Pss. 55:18; 92:3) or describe the wolf as prowling among the sheep at night, snatching its prey and returning to its lair to share it with its young. In the latter instance, the image would be poetic hyperbole: The loot is so great that there is even enough left to eat the next morning (cf. Zeph. 3:3).⁵⁸

27 Benjamin is a ravenous wolf;
In the morning he consumes the foe,
And in the evening he divides the spoil.”

27 בְּנִימִין יִאָכֵל יְטוֹף
בַּבֹּקֶר יֹאכַל עֵד
וּלְעֶרֶב יַחְלֶק שָׁלַל:

28 All these were the tribes of Israel, twelve in number, and this is what their father said to them as he bade them farewell, addressing to each a parting word appropriate to him.

28 כָּל-אֵלֶּה שְׁבֵטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׁנַיִם עָשָׂר וְזֹאת
אֲשֶׁר-דִּבֶּר לָהֶם אָבִיהֶם וַיְבָרֶךְ אוֹתָם אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר
בְּבִרְכָתוֹ בֵּרַךְ אֹתָם: 29 וַיֵּצֵא אוֹתָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם
אֲנִי נֹאסֵף אֶל-עַמִּי קִבְּרוּ אֹתִי אֶל-אֲבֹתַי אֶל-
הַמַּעְרָה אֲשֶׁר בַּשָּׂדֶה עַפְרֹן הַחִתִּי: 30 בַּמַּעְרָה
אֲשֶׁר בַּשָּׂדֶה הַמְּכַפְלָה אֲשֶׁר עַל-פְּנֵי-מְמָרָא
בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן אֲשֶׁר קָנָה אַבְרָהָם אֶת-הַשָּׂדֶה מֵאֵת
עַפְרֹן הַחִתִּי לְאַחֲזֵת קֶבֶר: 31 שָׁמָּה קִבְּרוּ אֶת-
אַבְרָהָם וְאֵת שָׂרָה אִשְׁתּוֹ שָׁמָּה קִבְּרוּ אֶת-יִצְחָק
וְאֵת רִבְקָה אִשְׁתּוֹ וְשָׁמָּה קִבְּרַתִּי אֶת-לֵאָה:

29 Then he instructed them, saying to them, “I am about to be gathered to my kin. Bury me with my fathers in the cave which is in the field of Ephron the Hittite, 30 the cave which is in the field of Machpelah, facing Mamre, in the land of Canaan, the field that Abraham bought from Ephron the Hittite for a burial site—31 there Abraham and his wife Sarah were buried; there Isaac and his wife Rebekah were buried; and there I buried Leah—32 the field and the

PROSE EPILOGUE: THE DEATH OF JACOB (vv. 28–33)

These verses recapitulate some of the details mentioned previously.

All these . . . This is a formula frequently used after lists to emphasize the unifying element.⁵⁹

the tribes of Israel Cf. verse 16. The phrase expresses the consciousness of an overall national unity and common identity that is “Israel,” even though each tribe is separately treated in the Testament as an autonomous entity.

twelve in number This is the first biblical reference to the twelve tribes of Israel. The number is a constant and is maintained in tribal lists either by regarding Joseph as a single tribe when Levi is included, as here, or, if Levi is excluded, by splitting Joseph into two separate tribes (cf. Num. 1,13,26). The clans of Ishmaelites (Gen. 17:20; 25:16), of Arameans (22:20–24), and of Esau (36:10–13) likewise numbered twelve, and the duodecimal organization is also known from ancient Greece.

as he bade . . . farewell Hebrew *va-yevarekh* and the following derivatives of the same stem *b-r-k* are here so understood, as in 47:7,10 (see Comments), rather than in the usual sense of “bless,” because not all the tribes received blessings.

29. *he instructed* The Hebrew stem *ts-v-h*, “to command” (cf. v. 33), is used in the sense of laying a charge on someone in preparation for death.⁶⁰ This usage has given rise to the postbiblical Hebrew *tsavva’ah*, “last will and testament.”

gathered to my kin See Comment to 25:8 and 47:30. This is the only instance of the use of this phrase by the speaker about himself, and the only case in which “kin” appears in the singular Hebrew form (*‘am*).

Bury me . . . Here Jacob imposes upon all his sons the obligation to bury him in Canaan, but he does not make them swear to that effect, as he had Joseph (47:29–31), because it was not in their power to implement his wish. Only Joseph had the necessary ready access to the Egyptian authorities (50:4f.).

30. *the cave* The precise description of the burial site follows that of 23:17–20.

31. *Rebekah . . . Leah* The death and burial of these matriarchs has not previously been mentioned.

cave in it, bought from the Hittites.”³³ When Jacob finished his instructions to his sons, he drew his feet into the bed and, breathing his last, he was gathered to his people.

32 מִקְנֵה הַשָּׂדֶה וְהַמְעָרָה אֲשֶׁר־בּוֹ מֵאֵת בְּנֵי־חֵת:
33 וַיְבַל יַעֲקֹב לְעֵינָיו אֶת־בְּגָדָיו וַיֹּאסֶף רַגְלָיו אֶל־
הַמֶּטֶה וַיְגֹעַ וַיֹּאסֶף אֶל־עַמּוּי:

50 Joseph flung himself upon his father’s face and wept over him and kissed him.² Then Joseph ordered the physicians in his service to embalm his father, and the physicians embalmed Israel.³ It required forty days, for such is the full period of embalming. The Egyptians bewailed him seventy days;⁴ and when the wailing period was over, Joseph spoke

ג וַיִּפֹּל יוֹסֵף עַל־פְּנֵי אָבִיו וַיִּבְכֶּה עָלָיו וַיִּשְׁקֵלֹו:
2 וַיִּצַו יוֹסֵף אֶת־עֲבָדָיו אֶת־הַרְפָּאִים לְחַנֹּט אֶת־
אָבִיו וַיַּחְנְטוּ הַרְפָּאִים אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל: 3 וַיְמַלְאוּ־לוֹ
אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם כִּי בָן יְמַלְאוּ יְמֵי הַחֲנֻטִּים וַיִּבְכּוּ
אֹתוֹ מִצָּרִים שִׁבְעִים יוֹם: 4 וַיַּעֲבְרוּ יְמֵי בְכִיתוֹ

33. he drew his feet into the bed Presumably, he had been sitting with his feet over the side of the bed (cf. 48:2,12), but this is hardly a likely posture for one about to breathe his last. The unique phrase may be a figurative expression for dying. The usual threefold formula (cf. 25:8,17; 35:29) includes *va-yamot*, “and he died,” which is here missing; this phrase may be used instead. In fact, “the drawing in (Heb. *va-ye’esof*) of the feet” goes together with *va-ye’asefu*, “he was gathered. . . .” Furthermore, the two words tie in with *he’asefu*, “come together,” in the very first verse of the chapter to form a literary frame for the entire Testament.

CHAPTER 50

Mourning and Burial (vv. 1–14)

1. Joseph flung himself upon his father’s face Such a gesture is unique. The usual phrase for such an emotional embrace is “to fall on the neck,”¹ but this would be appropriate only when the parties involved are in an upright position.

and kissed him For the kiss as a farewell token, see Genesis 31:28, 32:1; and Ruth 1:9,14. It is not otherwise attested in parting from the dead. But the author of the Book of Jubilees (23:5) similarly has Isaac kissing the dead Abraham, and it may be that the practice was widespread though unrecorded.

2. Joseph orders the embalming of his father. He too is to be embalmed at death (v. 26). Such a practice is never again referred to in the Bible. It is well known that mummification, with all its elaborate ritual, played a crucial role in the Egyptian religion and was bound up with the cult of Osiris and conceptions of the afterlife. Survival of death was taken for granted by the Egyptians. Central to this notion was the belief in the importance of the physical preservation of the body. They took meticulous care to prevent the putrefaction of the corpse in order to ensure the right of the deceased to immortality. But the embalming of Jacob and Joseph is without any religious significance. In both cases the act is a purely practical measure, for Jacob is to be buried far from his place of death, and Joseph is to be reinterred many years later (v. 25). The text subtly underlines the disconnection of the embalming procedure from any pagan context by having Joseph entrust the task to “physicians in his service.” It was not performed by professional mortuary priests.

3. forty days . . . seventy days It is not clear if the two periods overlap or are consecutive. Detailed information on the embalming process is lacking for the ancient period, but is available from the fifth century B.C.E. and from the late Hellenistic period. Herodotus (Histories 2.86) reports that the body was placed in niter for seventy days. Diodorus of Sicily (Histories 1.91) describes a thirty-day dressing of the corpse with oils and spices and seventy-two days of public mourning for a king. Jacob is apparently being accorded royal honors. Jewish exegetes have by and large understood that forty days were required for embalming, followed by another thirty days of mourning. The time of mourning would be in accordance with the period of public grief observed for Aaron (Num. 20:29)

to Pharaoh's court, saying, "Do me this favor, and lay this appeal before Pharaoh: ⁵"My father made me swear, saying, "I am about to die. Be sure to bury me in the grave which I made ready for myself in the land of Canaan." Now, therefore, let me go up and bury my father; then I shall return."⁶ And Pharaoh said, "Go up and bury your father, as he made you promise on oath."

⁷So Joseph went up to bury his father; and with him went up all the officials of Pharaoh, the senior members of his court, and all of Egypt's dignitaries, ⁸together with all of Joseph's household, his brothers, and his father's household; only their children, their flocks, and their herds were left in the region of Goshen. ⁹Chariots, too, and horsemen went up with him; it was a very large troop.

¹⁰When they came to Goren ha-Atad, which is beyond the Jordan, they held there a very great and solemn lamentation; and he observed a mourning period of seven days for his father. ¹¹And when the Canaanite inhabitants of the

וַיְדַבֵּר יוֹסֵף אֶל־בֵּית פַּרְעֹה לֵאמֹר אֲסִנָּא
מִצְאָתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיכֶם דְּבֹרִינָא בְּאֹנִי פַרְעֹה
לֵאמֹר: ⁵ אָבִי הִשְׁבִּיעַנִי לֵאמֹר הִנֵּה אֲנֹכִי מֵת
בְּקִבְרִי אֲשֶׁר כָּרַיתִי לִי בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן שָׂמָה
תִּקְבְּרֵנִי וְעַתָּה אֶעֱלֶה־נָּא וְאֶקְבְּרָה אֶת־אָבִי
וְאֲשׁוּבָה: ⁶ וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה עֲלֶה וְקַבֵּר אֶת־אָבִיךָ
כַּאֲשֶׁר הִשְׁבִּיעָךָ: ⁷ וַיַּעַל יוֹסֵף לִקְבֹּר אֶת־אָבִיו
וַיַּעֲלוּ אִתּוֹ כָּל־עַבְדֵי פַרְעֹה זְקֵנֵי בֵיתוֹ וְכָל זְקֵנֵי
אֶרֶץ־מִצְרָיִם: ⁸ וְכָל בֵּית יוֹסֵף וְאֶחָיו וְבֵית אָבִיו
לֶךְ טַפָּם וְצֹאנָם וּבְקָרָם עֲזוּבוּ בְּאֶרֶץ גֹּשֶׁן: ⁹ וַיַּעַל
עִמּוֹ גַּם־רֶכֶב גַּם־פָּרָשִׁים וַיְהִי הַמַּחֲנֶה כְּבֹד מְאֹד:
¹⁰ וַיָּבֹאוּ עַד־גְּדֹן הָאֲטָד אֲשֶׁר בְּעֵבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן
וַיִּסְפְּדוּ־שָׁם מִסֹּפֶד גָּדוֹל וְכִבְד מְאֹד וַיַּעַשׂ לְאָבִיו
אָבֶל שִׁבְעַת יָמִים: ¹¹ וַיֵּרָא יוֹשֵׁב הָאֶרֶץ הַכְּנַעֲנִי

and Moses (Deut. 34:8). Jewish law to the present time requires a thirty-day mourning period after burial (*sheloshim*) for close relatives, during which various restrictions are observed.

4. the wailing period That is, the period fixed by convention (cf. Deut. 34:8).

to Pharaoh's court The king is not directly approached by Joseph probably because a mourner was considered unclean and was not allowed in his presence.²

5. made me swear See Comments to 47:29–31 and 49:29–32.

I made ready Hebrew *kariti*, from stem *k-r-h*, may mean either "I dug"³ or "I purchased." But neither meaning suits a reference to the Cave of Machpelah (v. 13), which had been purchased, not dug, by Abraham, not Jacob (chap. 23). In light of this, some moderns have suggested that the verse reflects another tradition about the site of Jacob's burial. However, as Malbim points out, a similar usage of the verb *k-r-h* in 2 Chronicles 16:14 (cf. 1 Kings 15:24) indicates that the term may simply mean "to prepare a grave in advance."

then I shall return The assurance reflects an undercurrent of anxiety (cf. Exod. 1:10), and hints at something of a deterioration in the situation of the Israelites in Egypt.

7–9. The funeral procession comprises a vast throng. The elite of the court and government participate. The charioteers, not usually depicted in Egyptian tomb paintings of such events, are most likely present for security reasons, since the burial is to take place beyond the borders of the land. Women, children, flocks, and herds would not be included in a funeral cortege. The explicit mention of their exclusion may hint at a thwarted desire on the part of the tribes to return to Canaan.

10–13. The funeral takes place in two stages. The entire cortege first proceeds to a place at which a great public mourning ceremony is held. Here formal Egyptian participation in the rites is completed. Then, after a week's stay, the immediate family continues the journey to the Cave of Machpelah, where the body is privately interred.

10–12. Goren ha-Atad Literally, "the threshing-floor of the bramble." The site is mentioned nowhere else and cannot be certainly identified. "Beyond the Jordan" can mean either east or west of the river, depending on the standpoint of the speaker or writer.⁴ Here it refers to Canaan (v. 11), and the place most probably lies along the coastal road (the Via Maris), since this would be the shortest route for anyone traveling from Egypt to Canaan, as Exodus 13:17 notes. Another name for the site is Abel-mizraim (v. 11). The first element here most likely means "a stream" and is a component of several biblical place-names.⁵ By a play on words, it is connected with the Hebrew stem *ʿ-ḡ-l*, "to mourn." Why does the procession stop just at this place? Interestingly, the local Canaanites

land saw the mourning at Goren ha-Atad, they said, “This is a solemn mourning on the part of the Egyptians.” That is why it was named Abel-mizraim, which is beyond the Jordan. ¹²Thus his sons did for him as he had instructed them. ¹³His sons carried him to the land of Canaan, and buried him in the cave of the field of Machpelah, the field near Mamre, which Abraham had bought for a burial site from Ephron the Hittite. ¹⁴After burying his father, Joseph returned to Egypt, he and his brothers and all who had gone up with him to bury his father.

¹⁵When Joseph’s brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, “What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrong that we did him!” ¹⁶So

אֶת־הָאֵבֶל בְּגֵרֹן הָאֲטָד וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲבֵל־כְּבֹד זֶה לְמִצְרַיִם עַל־כֵּן קָרָא שְׁמָהּ אֵבֶל מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר בְּעֵבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן׃ ¹² וַיַּעֲשׂוּ בָנָיו לֹא כֵן כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּם׃ ¹³ וַיִּשְׂאוּ אֹתוֹ בָנָיו אֶרְצָה כְּנָעַן וַיִּקְבְּרוּ אֹתוֹ בְּמַעְרַת שְׂדֵה הַמַּכְפֵּלָה אֲשֶׁר קָנָה אַבְרָהָם אֶת־הַשְּׂדֵה לְאַחֲזֵת־לְקַבֵּר מֵאֵת עַפְרֹן הַחִתִּי עַל־פְּנֵי מִמְרָא׃ ¹⁴ וַיָּשָׁב יוֹסֵף מִצְרַיִמָּה הוּא וְאָחָיו וְכָל־הָעֹלָיִם אִתּוֹ לְקַבֵּר אֶת־אָבִיו אַחֲרַי קָבְרוּ אֶת־אָבִיו׃ ¹⁵ וַיִּרְאוּ אַחֲרַי יוֹסֵף כִּי־מֵת אָבִיהֶם וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוֹ יִשְׁטַמְנוּ יוֹסֵף וְהַשֵּׁב יֵשִׁיב לָנוּ אֵת כָּל־הַרְעָה אֲשֶׁר גָּמְלָנוּ אֹתוֹ׃ ¹⁶ וַיִּצְווּ אֱלֹהֵי יוֹסֵף לֵאמֹר אֲבִיךָ

are impressed by the Egyptian presence. The name Abel-mizraim suggests that the site had important Egyptian connections. It may well be Tell el-‘Ajjul (Beth ‘Eglaim) situated 4.5 miles (7 km.) southwest of Gaza on the eastern Mediterranean coast alongside the desert road that connected the Hyksos capital in the Nile Delta with Asia. Excavations have disclosed that the town was an Egyptian stronghold. Just a little to the south, on the same highway, lies Deir el-Balah, where a large collection of Egyptian-style anthropoid clay coffins have been found in a Late Bronze Age cemetery. The place was a burial ground for high-ranking Egyptians serving in Canaan and for Egyptianized Canaanite rulers and dignitaries. Such an association would explain why the cortege halted at Abel-mizraim for public homage to Jacob in his own country.

seven days The antiquity of this custom is attested by its presence in the Epic of Gilgamesh.⁶ In biblical times we find the inhabitants of Jabesh Gilead fasting seven days after the funeral rites for Saul and his sons (1 Sam. 31:13). Job and his friends similarly observe a seven-day mourning period (Job 2:13). This is a well-established rule among Jews by the early second century B.C.E. (Ben Sira 22:12; cf. Jth. 16:24). Strict mourning for seven days (*shiv’ah*) following the burial of a close relative has remained the Jewish practice.

12–14. The focus now shifts back to the brothers. They too fulfilled their father’s last request (49:29–32) by completing the final segment of the journey to Hebron.

returned See Comments to verses 5,7–9.

Joseph and His Brothers: The Finale (vv. 15–21)

The Joseph story reverts to its opening theme: the complicated relations between the brothers and Joseph. Earlier the brothers had not sought forgiveness. In fact, they had maintained an unbroken silence (chap. 45). Yet throughout the seventeen years that elapsed since the day of reconciliation, the nagging voice of conscience was not stilled. Now that death has removed the commanding presence of the patriarch, family cohesion falls apart and the brothers anticipate Joseph’s revenge for the terrible crime they committed against him (cf. 27:41).

15. When Joseph’s brothers saw That is, when the reality of the situation struck them on their return to Egypt.

What if Hebrew *lu* is unparalleled in this sense. It is always used in conditional sentences (cf. 17:18). It must be assumed that the apodosis, or resolution of the condition, is understood but unspoken. The idea would be, “If Joseph should harbor a grudge, what would become of us?”

16–17. The brothers send Joseph a message through a third party, rather than risk a personal confrontation. Apparently, they trifle with the truth in reporting a message from their

they sent this message to Joseph, “Before his death your father left this instruction: ¹⁷So shall you say to Joseph, ‘Forgive, I urge you, the offense and guilt of your brothers who treated you so harshly.’ Therefore, please forgive the offense of the servants of the God of your father.” And Joseph was in tears as they spoke to him.

¹⁸His brothers went to him themselves, flung themselves before him, and said, “We are prepared to be your slaves.”

¹⁹But Joseph said to them, “Have no fear! Am I a substitute for God? ²⁰Besides, although you intended me harm, God intended it for good, so as to bring about the present result—the survival of many people. ²¹And so, fear not. I will sustain you and your children.” Thus he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

²²So Joseph and his father’s household remained in Egypt. Joseph lived one hundred and ten years. ²³Joseph

צוה לפני מותו לאמר: ¹⁷ כהתאמר ליוסף
אנא שא נא פשע אחיך וחסאתם בירדעה
גמלוך ועתה שא נא לפשע עבדי אלהי אביך
ובך יוסף בדברם אליו: ¹⁸ וילכו גם־אחיו
ויפלו לפניו ויאמרו הננו לך לעבדים: ¹⁹ ויאמר
אלהם יוסף אלתיראו כי התחת אלהים אני:
²⁰ ואתם חשבתם עלי רעה אלהים חשבה
לטובה למען עשה ביום הזה להחית ע־סרב:
שביעי ²¹ ועתה אלתיראו אנכי אכלכל
אתכם ואת־טפכם וינחם אותם וידבר על־לבם:
²² וישב יוסף במצרים הוא ובית אביו ויחי יוסף
מאה ועשר שנים: מפטיר ²³ וירא יוסף

father, for had Jacob really known the fact of Joseph’s kidnapping and sale into slavery, he would surely have made a clear reference to it in his Testament.

God of your father As Abravanel observes, they do not invoke a claim of brotherliness since they had forfeited it by their own actions. Hence, they appeal to his respect and love for his father and to the religion that unites them all. Once again we meet with the biblical idea of the consciousness of God as the most powerful factor controlling human behavior, stronger than the ties of kinship.⁷

18. When the brothers learn of Joseph’s emotional reaction they feel free to go to him in person. There is here an echo of the opening scene of the Joseph narrative. The boyhood dreams of lordship over his kin (37:7–10) have long been fulfilled, but the reality is now distasteful to him for his character is being called into question (cf. 42:6,9; 44:14,16). He had earlier tested his brothers; now they challenge him, even though they are wholly in his power. Will the base human desire for revenge triumph over nobility of character?

19–20. Have no fear! Their anxiety is allayed at once. Joseph has no interest in seeking revenge because the very idea offends his personal theology. Man dares not usurp the prerogative of God to whom alone belongs the right of punitive vindication (cf. Lev. 19:18). Moreover, human actions and their consequences are far more profound than human intentions. God may use man’s evil purposes as the instrument for ultimate good, beyond the knowledge, desire, or realization of the human agents involved (cf. Gen. 44:5–7). What may seem to be a chance succession of disparate incidents is in reality a process, so that what has happened and what is unfolding take on meaning when viewed from the perspective of God’s time (cf. Prov. 16:9; 19:21; 20:24).

21. I will sustain you This reassurance is puzzling since the famine is long over. Again there is a hint of a deterioration in the Israelite situation (cf. vv. 5,8).

22. Joseph is singularly blessed with respect to age and progeny. One hundred and ten years were regarded as the ideal life span in ancient Egypt. In Israel it seems to have been 120 years (cf. Gen. 6:3), attained only by Moses (Deut. 31:2; 34:7).

23. It is not clear whether the great-grandchildren (= “children of the third generation,” cf. Exod. 20:5; Num. 14:18) are Ephraim’s or Joseph’s (“through Ephraim”). If the former, Ephraim’s line would have begotten one more generation than Manasseh’s in the same period of time. This would be in fulfillment of the blessing of Genesis 48:19. If the latter, then Joseph would have seen only the grandchildren of both his sons before dying. He would thus have lived to see at least the fourth generation. This is a sign of special favor, such as Job enjoys as a reward for his piety (Job 42:16). A seventh-century B.C.E. Aramaic funerary inscription from Syria airs the notion that living to see “children of the fourth generation” is the reward of righteousness.⁸

lived to see children of the third generation of Ephraim; the children of Machir son of Manasseh were likewise born upon Joseph’s knees. ²⁴At length, Joseph said to his brothers, “I am about to die. God will surely take notice of you and bring you up from this land to the land that He promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.” ²⁵So Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, “When God has taken notice of you, you shall carry up my bones from here.”

²⁶Joseph died at the age of one hundred and ten years; and he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt.

לְאֶפְרַיִם בְּנֵי שְׁלֹשִׁים* זָם בְּנֵי מַכִּיר בֶּן־מְנַשֶּׁה
 יָלְדוּ עַל־בְּרֵכֵי יוֹסֵף: ²⁴ וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף אֶל־אֶחָיו
 אֲנֹכִי מֵת וְאֱלֹהִים פֶּקֶד יִפְקֹד אֶתְכֶם וְהֶעֱלָה
 אֶתְכֶם מִן־הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע
 לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וְלִיעֲקֹב: ²⁵ וַיִּשְׁבַּע יוֹסֵף אֶת־
 בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר פֶּקֶד יִפְקֹד אֱלֹהִים אֶתְכֶם
 וְהֶעֱלִתֶם אֶת־עַצְמוֹתַי מִזֶּה: ²⁶ וַיָּמָת יוֹסֵף בֶּן־
 מֵאָה וָעֶשֶׂר שָׁנַיִם וַיַּחַנְטוּ אֹתוֹ וַיִּשֶׂם בְּאֶרֶן
 בְּמִצְרַיִם:

v. 23. ס' רבתי

children of Machir Machir was the most important of the clans of Manasseh and, at one time, was identified with the tribe as a whole. The Machirites captured and occupied the Transjordanian regions of Gilead and Bashan.⁹ Machir’s first-born is given as Gilead in 1 Chronicles 7:14, a name without doubt derived from the association of the clan with the area.

likewise born upon Joseph’s knees This idiom, as explained in the Comments to 30:3 and 48:12, usually implies legitimation of progeny. Here the parallel phrase “Joseph lived to see . . .” suggests that a figurative use of the idiom is intended. However, one cannot entirely rule out the possibility that behind the narrative lies a tradition about the formal incorporation of the clans of Machir into the House of Joseph.

24. I am about to die Compare 48:21. Joseph’s last words would seem to imply that he died before his brothers, even though, with the exception of Benjamin, they were all his seniors. This is hardly likely. Clearly, “brothers” here is loosely used since in the next verse it is the “children of Israel” who are put under oath. We have here another example of the biblical tendency to treat the tribe or people as a corporate personality (cf. 46:3f.).

God will surely take notice of you On the Hebrew stem *p-k-d*, see Comment to 21:1. This reassuring profession of faith, made fifty-four years after Jacob’s death, betrays a serious deterioration in the situation of the Israelites in Egypt in the intervening period. The repetition of the statement in verse 25 underscores its seminal importance. The measure of its impact is its use as the rallying cry when Moses first appears as the national savior (Exod. 3:16).

Abraham . . . Isaac . . . Jacob This clustering of the three patriarchs for the first time sets the pattern for all such subsequent citations in the Torah, which are invariably in a context of the divine promises of national territory for the people of Israel,¹⁰ the unifying theme of all the patriarchal narratives.

25. Why Joseph does not request immediate interment in the land of his fathers is not explained; no doubt, he knows that present conditions are unfavorable. The oath he extracts was indeed carried out at the time of the Exodus, as Exodus 13:19 reports. No request for any specific burial place is made, and he is finally laid to rest in a plot of land that Jacob had once bought in Shechem (Josh. 24:32; cf. Gen. 33:19).

26. a coffin The use of a coffin is characteristically Egyptian and is never again mentioned in biblical literature. In striking contrast to the honors accorded Jacob, no ritual or mourning is recorded. The atmosphere, heavy with the anticipation of enslavement, is filled with foreboding.

The formative period in Israel’s history is now over. The divine promise of nationhood has been fulfilled. The great national drama of the slavery and the Exodus is about to unfold. Yet the Book of Genesis closes with an assurance of redemption. The people of Israel will possess the land pledged to them by God in His oaths to the patriarchs.