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**“Flawed, Complex, or Faultless?” Understanding the
Characterization of Joseph:**
A Literary and Exegetical Analysis of Joseph

By
Will Young

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of Covenant Theological Seminary
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts in Biblical & Theological Studies.

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Abstract

This thesis will explore whether the Joseph of Genesis is presented as a character that is flawed, flawless, or a mixture of flaws and virtues. I will do this first by learning how characters are created and developed in Old Testament narrative through descriptions, dialogue, actions, comparisons, and value statements. Then we will apply these principles to see how Joseph is progressively characterized throughout his story. Secondly, I will examine two specific texts that Joseph's detractors use as evidence of ill-will. Those are his introduction and the dream narrative in 37:1-11, and key passages from the testing of his brothers in 42-45. My goal in examining these texts is to see if there is in fact clear evidence of ill-will, or if there may even be evidence of goodwill. The goal is to examine more critically the negative assumptions often made about his character to see if these assumptions have merit. This thesis will conclude that Joseph is best understood in light of how his character is progressively developed and revealed to the reader.

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Chapter 1

The Characterization of Joseph

The story of Joseph in Genesis 37-50 is a literary masterpiece. This is universally acknowledged. Joseph, the central character of the story, is also universally acknowledged as an inspiring figure. His triumph over adversity and betrayal, integrity when faced with temptation, wisdom when confronted with perplexing problems, willingness to forgive those who caused him pain, and profound insight into God's purpose for his life all stir our admiration for him. These moments of his life cast him in a positive light. But there are other moments of his story that cast doubt on him. Did he unwisely antagonize his brothers? Was he disrespectful to his father? Did he desire vengeance on his brothers? Or did he not do any of those things? Could he have been consistently righteous? Or is the truth somewhere in between?

This thesis will explore the question: "How is Joseph characterized - as faultless, flawed, or complex?" In other words, should we read Joseph as having unrighteous motives at any point in his story, or should we assume everything he does to be justified? Or, should we see him as a complex person who struggles, matures, and grows over the course of the story? Although these questions may not change the overarching themes and message of the story, they do offer the

reader an opportunity to explore the exquisite craft and insight of the author of Genesis.¹

The first step in answering how the author intended his audience to see Joseph is to understand what characterization is and how the author of Genesis uses it to present Joseph. Once we have explored this question, we will test how it relates to two specific passages: Genesis 37:1-12, where we are introduced to Joseph and hear of his dreams, and Genesis 42, where Joseph first tests his brothers. These texts are often used as proof of Joseph's poor or immature character; by careful exposition and application of what we have learned about his characterization, we will see if the assumptions made about him based on these events are justified.

As we turn to the issue of characterization, it is important to note that the story of Joseph is a theological, historical, and literary work. It is theological in the sense that it teaches and embodies truths about the wisdom, faithfulness, and provision of God for his people. It is historical insofar as it is recounting an important piece of the history of the nation of Israel. But it is also clearly a masterful work of literature. Rather than simply teaching abstract precepts, it embodies and incarnates them. Rather than simply tell us what happened, it imbues events with meaning and theological significance. And it does all of this in a way that is artfully crafted and designed to make the story readable, enjoyable, and memorable. "The literary impulse is to 'show' rather than 'tell' -

¹ Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible*, Second edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic 1992), chap. 3, eBook collection (EBSCOhost).; Donald Seybold, "Paradox and Symmetry in the Joseph Narrative," in *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives*, ed. Kenneth R.R. Gros Louis, James Stokes Ackerman, Thayer S. Warshaw (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1974). 1:59.

to recreate an experience so we can go through it with the characters to whom it happened.”² This impulse is prevalent throughout the Joseph narrative, so it is fitting to approach it as a literary narrative—especially when it comes to the characterization of Joseph.

Applying Methods of Characterization to Joseph

Literary narratives are composed of three ingredients: setting, characters and plot or action.³ Biblical authors used these elements to convey meaning to the reader, and they use the same tools contemporary authors use to develop them. The focus of this thesis is on Joseph as a character; we will only be looking at setting or plot insofar as they help us understand how Joseph is presented as a character.

In order to bring a character to life, authors may rely on a narrator’s description and assessment, the character’s own speech and actions, or how other characters respond and react to that character. The process of using these and other narrative tools to craft a character is called characterization. As the protagonist, or main character, of his story, Joseph is given extensive characterization by the author of Genesis. Over the course of the whole story, Joseph is developed by practically every means available to the author, leaving readers with a clearly defined character. We will examine here how Joseph is

² Ryken continues “The stories in the Bible exist on a spectrum. At one end is a brief fragment in which we are told only the facts about what happened. Here the historical or documentary impulse governs. At the other end are stories in which the writer images the events in sufficient detail that we can recreate the experience in our imagination. The farther a biblical narrative moves toward the second end, the more accurately we can call it a literary narrative” (Chap. 3).

³ Ryken, ch. 3

characterized through the narrator's descriptions and assessments, his own actions and reactions to events in the plot, his speech and dialogue, how he is compared and contrasted to other characters, his inner life, as well as gaps where the narrator keeps the reader in the dark, and finally through Joseph's summary value statement at the end of his story.⁴

Before proceeding, however, it is important to make a distinction. The aim of this examination is not to understand Joseph the historical person, but to understand Joseph as a literary character. I fully affirm the historicity and inspiration of the Bible, including Genesis and Joseph. The Joseph of Genesis is based on a historical person, but he is presented to us as a character in a literary narrative. As a historical person, so much more could have been said about him, but as a literary character the author chose to tell us only certain things about him and about his story.⁵ This distinction has many implications, but the most significant implication for this work is that while Joseph the historical person was certainly a sinner and unquestionably had flaws, Joseph the literary character may be characterized in a way that presents him to readers as faultless. Whether or not that is the case is what this thesis will explore. The

⁴ For lists of characterization methods, in addition to Ryken, see Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1981), 116-117; and Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield, UK: The Almond Press, 1983), 34-40.

⁵ "Old Testament writers never misrepresented the facts, but they intentionally reported some things and omitted others to convey their perspectives to their audience. As we investigate Old Testament stories, we must recognize the selective presentations of characters." Richard Pratt, *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Student's Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1990), 136.

important point, however, is that we ought to let the author of the literary narrative guide and inform the way we see characters and their actions.⁶

1. Narrator's Description and Assessment

All the literary narratives of the Pentateuch are told through an omniscient third-person narrator. This narrator has complete knowledge of the story and all the characters and settings involved, including insight into each character's thoughts, feelings, and motivations.⁷ Since God is present and active in Biblical narratives, the narrator can sometimes, by the Holy Spirit's inspiration, even reveal what is happening in the mind and heart of God. With all that information at his disposal, however, the narrator is cryptic and often slow to divulge even basic information about a character, such as, what did they look like?

Physical descriptions of biblical characters are almost laughably terse and sparse. That is because the narrator "will only mention something like that if it is going to be a factor in a plot."⁸ The same rule applies to clothing or other items that distinguish one character from the rest. This means that when we see a character described in terms of a physical characteristic, an article of clothing,

⁶ Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), chap. 9, eBook collection (EBSCOhost).

⁷J.P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide*, trans. Ineke Smit (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 56.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 71.

or some distinctive item, we should be aware that the narrator is cluing us into something important for the story or the character.

Similarly, because the narrator has such comprehensive knowledge, he will sometimes render a judgment of some kind about a character or an action. This is also uncommon, which might surprise modern Americans sensibilities. On social media there is pressure for wrong-doing or thinking to be quickly and soundly condemned, often without giving time to carefully weigh a person's actions, seeing both the bad and the good. Ambiguity can sometimes be unwelcome in our society's public discourse. But the biblical narrator has no such tendencies, and is therefore not quick to judge, and when he does it can be subtle, often by an understated offhand remark or a comment from another character. The narrator expects the reader to pick up on crafty insinuations or use their common sense in order to come to a conclusion.⁹ So when an overt assessment of a character is made about a character, either directly by the narrator, or indirectly through another character, we ought to pay close attention.

The author of Genesis uses both of these methods—direct statement by the narrator and indirect statement by other characters—to introduce us to Joseph as the story begins, and then gives us more and more pieces as the story goes on. In Genesis 37:2 the first thing we learn about Joseph is that he is 17 years old. We are not told the age of any of his brothers or the age of his father, Jacob. While this does not tell us much about his character, it does show the focus the narrator is putting on Joseph in particular.

⁹ Ibid., 149. Fokkelman uses the examples of Gideon's sin and the conflict involving Abimelech in Judges 8 (150-151), as well as when Israel demands from God a king in 1 Sam 8 (153-155).

The second way the narrator describes Joseph is in verse 3: “Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons, because he was the son of his old age.” Although this is not a direct description or assessment of Joseph, the author wants us to know that in the eyes of his father, Joseph was more loved than all his siblings. On the one hand, that tells us that Jacob is a father who shows favoritism, but it is also a subtle way for the narrator to indirectly elevate Joseph. Readers should not assume that Joseph was spoiled and bratty because he was favored, but only that Joseph enjoyed a childhood in which he could be confident and assured in the love of his father. If Joseph’s brothers did not share this experience that was not Joseph’s doing, but Jacob’s.¹⁰

The third, and perhaps most intriguing element in his introduction is the famous “coat of many colors” (37:3). Although we cannot know for certain what exactly this robe was and all that it entailed, we can say with confidence that it was a visible expression or manifestation¹¹ of Jacob’s lavish, unique, and deep love for Joseph, as well as Joseph’s place of privilege and preeminence in his father’s eyes.¹² To the brothers, this robe represented the favor they wanted¹³ from their father and presumably fed directly into their resentment of Joseph. But to us, the robe can also represent fatherly affection, the joy of sonship, and the privileges that come with them.

¹⁰ For more on the theme of favoritism in Genesis, see James Ackerman, “Joseph, Judah, & Jacob,” in *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives*, ed. Kenneth R.R. Gros Louis, James Stokes Ackerman, Thayer S. Warshaw (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1974), 2:96.

¹¹ Seybold, 60.

¹² *Ibid.*, 63.

¹³ And since they were older than Joseph, they likely felt they were also more entitled to it.

In the next part of the story, when Joseph serves in Potiphar's house, we see three other significant descriptions. First, in 39:2, we are told that "Joseph became a successful man" in the service of his master Potiphar, and that as a consequence he "found favor in his sight" (v. 4). A similar thing happens at the end of the chapter with the keeper of the prison, and Joseph is favored by him as well (v. 21). Secondly, in 39:6-7 the narrator tells us "Joseph was handsome in form and appearance," which is why his master's wife "cast her eyes on" him. These descriptions fit well with what we have already been told concerning his youth, his great potential, and his favored status. Earlier, he was favored by Jacob for being "the son of his old age"; now Potiphar and the keeper of the prison favor him for being successful and prosperous and Potiphar's wife favors him for being good looking. These observations are significant for three reasons. First, they continue to present a positive overall impression of Joseph. Second, they create irony that in both situations being favored by someone over him leads to catastrophe rather than blessing.¹⁴ And thirdly, this picture sets up the reader for the most important thing we should know about Joseph: the Lord's presence with him.

Four times the narrator tells us in chapter 39 that "The LORD was with Joseph" (vv. 2, 3, 21, 23). This is significant for several reasons. First, it explains why Joseph was constantly favored.¹⁵ The link is, in fact, explicitly stated as the reason for his prosperity both in Potiphar's house and in prison and for being

¹⁴ Seybold, 62.

¹⁵ Robert E. Longacre, *Joseph: A Story of Divine Providence: A Text Theoretical and Textlinguistic Analysis of Genesis 37 and Genesis 39-48* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1989), 45.

favored by his masters. Verse 21 goes so far as to say “the LORD was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and *gave him favor* in the sight of the keeper of the prison” (emphasis mine).

Secondly, this description highlights the main theme of Joseph’s story, which is God’s faithfulness to Joseph and his family. Throughout his life Joseph comes in and out of favor with many people, but God’s presence with him is constant.¹⁶ Others may come and go, and at times he was completely alone, but the LORD – the faithful, covenant-making, and promise-keeping God of Israel – never left him.

Thirdly, although this is more a statement about God than Joseph, it is an implied seal of God’s favor upon and approval of Joseph. The narrator is letting the reader know God’s assessment of him. That does not mean Joseph was perfect, after all no one can earn God’s favor and God often sets his love on unworthy people - that is clear throughout Scripture. But the Bible also clearly teaches that God grants his favor and blessing to those who follow him and seek to walk in his ways.¹⁷

One final description with which we conclude this section comes after Joseph interprets Pharaoh’s dreams in 41:38-39. “Then Pharaoh said to his servants, ‘Can we find a man like this, in whom is the Spirit of God? Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘Since God has shown you all this, there is none so discerning and wise as you are.’” The initial question Pharaoh asks his servants

¹⁶ “The hidden plot in the story of Joseph is God’s providence at work” (Ryken, chap. 3).

¹⁷ “For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous but the way of the wicked will perish.” Ps. 1:6. See also Lev. 18:1-5, Dt. 5:29, 30:15-20, Prov. 3:1-6, Eccl. 12:13-14, Isa. 1:19-20, Matt. 7:24-27.

speaks volumes about the unique character and capabilities of Joseph. And just in case the implications of the question were unclear, Pharaoh turns to Joseph and tells him plainly that there are none as wise as him. Pharaoh then declares Joseph to be over all Egypt and significantly dresses him in new clothes:¹⁸ “Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph’s hand, and clothed him in garments of fine linen and put a gold chain about his neck” (v. 41).

At the time, Egypt was the greatest empire in the world. Pharaoh was the most powerful man on earth. He would have been surrounded by courtiers and advisors drawn from the most educated and prestigious of the elite classes. And Pharaoh asks them, “Can we find a man like this, in whom is the Spirit of God?” This question encapsulates Joseph perfectly. Even among the members of Pharaoh’s court, Joseph stood head and shoulders above everyone. There was no one as wise and discerning as him. His character, his intellect, his industry, his counsel, and his insight were all second to none. For this reason Pharaoh sets Joseph over all of Egypt and clothes him in his own royal raiments. Joseph was unique. He was not perfect, but the author of Genesis wants us to know that he was a singularly gifted and faithful man. This was not because of his inherent ability; rather that the Spirit of God was in him and the LORD was with him.

¹⁸ “The robe that symbolizes Joseph’s favored position with his father has as its counterpart the garments of fine linen that symbolize his favored position with Pharaoh” (Ryken, ch. 3).

2. Joseph's Actions and Reactions

While character descriptions are few and far between, a character's actions are by far the most common method of characterization in the Bible.¹⁹ After all, why should the narrator explicitly state information about a character when the character's actions speak for themselves? As the main character of the story, Joseph performs many actions. In the following, I will briefly examine five of them and see what, if anything, they reveal to us about his character. In particular, I will examine Joseph reporting on his brothers, seeking his brothers, fleeing from temptation, testing his brothers, and providing for his family.

Joseph's first action is to bring a bad report to his father about his brothers, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher - the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah (37:2). This action is particularly controversial, and thus we will return to examine it more closely later in the thesis. But for now it is enough to observe that this action is ambiguous.²⁰ It could reveal that Joseph had a tendency to provoke his brothers by tattling on them. But it could also be another reminder that Joseph's brothers are in fact wicked men, which is unambiguously revealed both before and after this passage.²¹ Rather than communicating Joseph's weakness as a self-righteous tattle-tale, it may communicate his integrity in refusing to join in their actions and his willingness to assume the risk of exposing them.²²

¹⁹ "In the stories of the Bible, character is usually action" (Ryken, ch. 2).

²⁰ "We know nothing of Joseph's feelings" (Berlin, 49).

²¹ Reuben slept with his step-mother, Jacob's concubine, Bilhah in 36:22. Simeon and Levi slaughter all the men of Shechem in 34:25-26. Judah takes a Canaanite wife, cheats his daughter-in law, Tamar, and then sleeps with her in 38.

²² Ryken, chap. 1.

Joseph's next action can also be interpreted more than one way. When Jacob sent Joseph to Shechem to check on his brothers, but they were not there, a stranger finds him wandering around and asks him what he is doing. Joseph replied, "I am seeking my brothers" (37:16). This action is significant. In the Old Testament, seeking someone or something is almost never a neutral action, and often suggests purpose and intentionality. After all one does not diligently and persistently search for something without cause, and the things someone seeks after can reveal something about that person's priorities. But the author of Genesis gives no clear indication of Joseph's intentions. Was he simply following his father's orders? Did he intend to bring another bad report to Jacob about his brothers? Or was he genuinely concerned for their welfare and desire to see them? The first would probably have been a factor, but either of the others might have been as well. We simply do not know enough yet about Joseph's character to make a judgment about either of these actions. More investigation is necessary.

Joseph's next major action comes two chapters later, when he flees from Potiphar's wife, leaving his outer garment²³ behind in her grasp (39:12). In this case, unlike both of his previous actions, Joseph explains his motivations in verses 8-9 (which we will return to in the next section, considering Joseph's speech). In this moment, Joseph's speech and action clearly demonstrate his honesty, integrity, and faithfulness to his master. And by leaving without his garment Joseph demonstrates his determination and the lengths to which he

²³ Heb. בגד differs from the cloak (כתנת) he lost in ch. 37, but is the same as the "fine garments" placed upon him by Pharaoh in 41:42.

will go to not compromise his principles. Whereas Joseph's earlier actions are ambiguous in what they reveal about his character, this episode leaves no room for doubt and it may also help us to understand why he did those other things: because his integrity compelled him to be faithful to those over him and made him unwilling to stay in the presence of wickedness.

Another of Joseph's more controversial actions begins in chapter 42, when Joseph's brothers arrive in Egypt and he tests them. Twice we are told by Joseph, in 42:15 and 42:16, that his brothers and their words are being tested. This revelation sets the tone for all of Joseph's actions throughout chapters 42-44, and everything he does can be summed up in one continuous action - Joseph is testing his brothers. This is controversial because the test includes harsh words (42:7), imprisonment (42:17, 24), deception (44:4-5), and threatening enslavement (44:17). All these actions by themselves would not speak well about Joseph, and they could be taken to imply a level of vengefulness and anger at his brothers.²⁴ But when they are seen in the context of Joseph testing the brothers, it becomes less clear that Joseph was doing any of these things in malice. One might even see that Joseph does these things for his brothers' good and out of a concern for their welfare²⁵ - testing them to see if they have really changed into "honest men" (42:11) or if they were still keeping their wickedness hidden.

²⁴ "Joseph may be both vindictive and redemptive in his dealings with his brothers" (Sternberg, chap. 7).

²⁵ Seybold, 70.

Joseph's last action by which we can assess his character is perhaps the most remarkable, and it is undeniably the most positive. After revealing himself to his brothers and instructing them to go bring Jacob and their families back to Egypt with them, Joseph says, "I will provide for you" (45:11). Once they do return, the promise is confirmed when Joseph provided for everyone (47:12). And after Jacob's death, Joseph again assuages his brothers' fears by repeating his promise "I will provide for you and your little ones" (50:21). Throughout these final chapters, most of Joseph's actions fit somehow into this general category of providing for his extended family. And he does not provide in a way that is begrudging, hesitant, or stingy. He gives instructions with meticulous forethought and attention to detail. He is lavish in sending carts and wagons to move his family. And he generously secures for them the best land available for their flocks and herds. The most remarkable thing about his provision, however, is that Joseph sees himself as God's instrument for sustaining the lives of his family (45:7). Thus by providing for his family, Joseph is carrying out God's action by which he kept his promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to make them into a great nation.

3. Joseph's Speech and Dialogue

Jesus taught his disciples, "From the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matt. 12:34), and that is certainly applicable to understanding characters in Old Testament narratives. A character's choice of words can

sometimes reveal their attitudes and motivations.²⁶ Once again, since Joseph is the principal protagonist, he has many moments of both dialogue and monologue. I will briefly consider six: Joseph recounting his dreams, rejecting Potiphar's wife, interpreting Pharaoh's dreams, speaking roughly to his brothers, speaking assuringly to his brothers, and finally prophesying at the end of his life.

Joseph's first words in the story are a monologue in which he recounts his two dreams to his family. As already mentioned, we will return to this text for a more in depth study in the next section of this paper. But it is worth mentioning that this is an intriguing monologue. First, it gives the reader no clear indication of what Joseph believes about the dreams or his attitude toward his family as he tells them. There are hints, but they are ambiguous and can be interpreted multiple ways. Second, the constant repetition of "Behold!" (והנה) can also be interpreted to mean various things. Was Joseph eager to show off and seek attention out of vanity and pride? Was he convicted of their importance as a revelation from God and really wanted his family to listen? Or was he confused and calling attention to things he did not understand? A straightforward reading of this monologue offers no certainty of his motivation. A third thing to note is the constant doubling.²⁷ Not only are there two dreams, but the retelling is filled with emphatic infinitive absolutes, verbs and objects that

²⁶ According to Fokkeman, "The most important window on the characters' emotional and conceptual perspectives is their own words, at least if they are not deceiving us or their conversation partner" (144).

²⁷ "Doubling can often be used for emphasis" (Ackerman, 86). For doubling as a structural theme in the story of Joseph, see Ryken, chap. 3.

repeat the same root, and using two verbs to express one action. We will return to this point later in examining this passage exegetically.

In Joseph's next instance of extended speech, he answers the invitation of Potiphar's wife to lie with her in 39:8-10. We saw earlier when considering Joseph's actions that, taken together, this speech and action demonstrate great integrity and moral character. Seldom do a character's speech and action fit together so consistently. Sometimes a character may speak in one way and act another, betraying their hypocrisy. More often, what a character does is never explained or what a character says is never verified in action. If the author of Genesis had only recorded Joseph's flight, then his character might be left open to questions regarding his motives - was he truly motivated by moral integrity, or fear of getting caught, or fear of intimacy, or even prejudice? If we only had his response to Potiphar's wife, then perhaps we could question his resolve - did he truly live up to that moral standard? But both word and deed are present: Joseph speaking passionately about not betraying his master's trust, discerning that such action would be "great wickedness and sin against God" (39:10), and then acting with such determination to escape from sin. This indicates to the reader that Joseph is a man of his word who speaks and acts with integrity.

Joseph speaks briefly in chapter 40 to interpret the baker's and cupbearer's dreams, but there seems little to glean with reference to his character so we will pass over these to look at Joseph's speech interpreting Pharaoh's dream in chapter 41. The first words Joseph says to Pharaoh in v. 16 are "It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer." These words

show us several things about Joseph: his humility, not taking the credit but giving it to God; his confidence and faith in God, that he will give him wisdom to explain the dream; his wisdom, speaking with clarity and boldness but in a way that honors and respects Pharaoh. We see these traits all demonstrated further as he explains Pharaoh's dream to him and recommends a response. It might be possible for someone to argue that Joseph is merely posturing and his suggestion that "Pharaoh select a discerning and wise man, and set him over the land of Egypt" (v. 33) is a play for power, but such allegations have little to no proof in the text and may betray cynical assumptions about the nature of power and the men who rise to attain it. In response one should consider, what could Joseph realistically have expected to happen? He was a foreigner and had just been brought to Pharaoh from prison. It is reasonable to infer that he hoped he might at least be released from prison (based on his request to the cupbearer in 40:14). Beyond that he may have even aspired to become one of the overseers mentioned in 41:34. That would have been far more likely than assuming he thought he could be the man in charge. In sum, Joseph's speech to Pharaoh shows clear evidence of humility, faith, and wisdom. And while it may be interpreted as being duplicitous, that is not borne out by the text, and there are other more reasonable alternative interpretations.

In chapter 42 we come to a troubling set of speeches by Joseph. When Joseph's brothers arrive in Egypt to buy food, we are told in verse 7, "Joseph saw his brothers and recognized them, but he treated them like strangers and spoke roughly to them." He then repeatedly accuses them of spying (vv. 9, 12,

14, 16), threatens them with imprisonment unless they can show him their youngest brother, Benjamin²⁸ (vv. 15-16), and finally decides to hold one of them, Simeon, hostage until they return with him (vv. 19-20). This is a challenging passage. We touched on it briefly when discussing Joseph's actions, specifically him testing his brothers, and we will come back to this passage later for a more in depth exegetical analysis. It may be that Joseph's first words to his brothers carried some anger - and it seems reasonable that no reader would begrudge him that. But the question becomes to what degree his words and actions in chapters 42-44 are justified by the revelation that he is testing his brothers? And if he was initially angry at his brothers, at what point could we say he is no longer speaking and acting out of anger but out of wise caution instead? We will return to those questions in the next chapter.

One important clue, however, which we must remember is how the story of Joseph testing his brothers ends. We see in 45:3 Joseph's emotional outburst, "I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?" And in the following verses, he extends an invitation for his brothers to bring their father and their families to Egypt to be saved from the famine. Joseph's words are emotionally laden and sincere. There can be no doubt at this point that he harbors no ill will toward them. He tells them in verse 5, "do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life." And he promises them, "I will provide for you" (v. 11). It is clear that Joseph had forgiven

²⁸ Joseph is possibly testing simply to ensure Benjamin's safety (Sternberg, chap. 8).

his brothers by this point in the story.²⁹ Nor did Joseph go back on his forgiveness, but seventeen years later, after the death of Jacob, he comforted them again and repeated his promise, “Do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones” (50:21). The main question to answer then is when did Joseph forgive his brothers? And what part did his testing of them have to play in it? Regardless of how one answers that question, one cannot come away from this story without feeling a great deal of respect and admiration for Joseph, and even being inspired by his graciousness and magnanimity. No matter when he forgave his brothers and no matter how he got to that point, the fact that he forgave them by itself speaks volumes regarding his character.

Finally, Joseph’s final words, which are often missed when retelling his story, give us one last glimpse at who he was.

And Joseph said to his brothers, “I am about to die, but God will visit you and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.” Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, “God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here.”
Genesis 50:24-25

This prophetic word and command are a fitting conclusion to his life. Joseph dies in the same way he lived his entire life - as a man of faith who trusted God would be faithful to his promises. He is so certain of God’s faithfulness that he orders for his remains to be kept ready for their departure when the time comes for the people of Israel to leave Egypt. Because of this final request the Israelites would have had a visible sign to remind them of God’s promise and of the prophetic words of their patriarch. Thus Joseph not only demonstrated profound

²⁹ “We have here both the climax and a classic case of Aristotelian reversal... In this speech Joseph forgives, demonstrates belief, and clearly acknowledges the whole paradoxical purpose of his ‘death’ as God’s way of preserving the family” (Seybold, 71).

faith in his final moments, but he became a model and symbol of faith for all who believed that one day God would bring them out of Egypt. With this final touch, the author of Genesis gives Joseph a pedestal that sets him up—at least at the end of his life—as a truly heroic, inspiring and faithful patriarch in the eyes of the Israelites who first read his story.

4. Joseph Compared and Contrasted

When we describe a person in everyday conversation, we often engage in comparison or contrast. For instance, if asked what someone looks like one might say, “Oh, she looks just like so-and-so.” Or, if we are recounting a person’s actions, “It was just like that other time when he did x.” This can also be done negatively: “She looks nothing like you!” Authors rely on this natural tendency when they develop characters.

There are two moments of natural comparison and contrast in Joseph’s story. The first is between Joseph and his brothers when he tells them about his dreams, and the second is in the juxtaposition of the stories of Judah and Tamar, and Joseph and Potiphar’s wife.

We have already seen how the author of Genesis is silent about Joseph’s motivations and attitude toward his brothers as the story begins. But the author swings to the opposite extreme in telling how his brothers felt. The reader is told three times in 37:4, 5, and 8 that they hated Joseph. Verse 4 also tells us that “they could not speak peacefully to him,” and in verse 11 we are given the reason for their animosity - “his brothers were jealous of him.” We will examine

these verses more closely in the next chapter, but the point of the overall contrast between Joseph and his brothers is that although we may have doubts and questions about Joseph, we do know everything we need to know about his brothers.³⁰ And even though we are saddened, we should not be surprised when we read in v. 18 that “they conspired against him to kill him.” By not commenting at all on Joseph’s motives, and commenting negatively to a nearly exaggerated degree on his brothers, the narrator may be inviting us to see Joseph in a much more positive light.

Turning to the second set of stories, it may be noted that Genesis 38 is a challenging passage to understand and to place within the Joseph narrative. It does give more information about Joseph’s brothers, specifically Judah, and at first further establishes them as antagonists. It also reveals a turning point for Judah, which sets up what he does later in the final test. But it is most immediately a parallel story contrasted with Joseph and Potiphar’s wife.³¹ When the stories are seen side by side, the message is clear: Joseph is pure and obedient in every way that his older brother Judah is dirty and wicked. Where Joseph demonstrates impeccable moral integrity and suffers unjustly, Judah demonstrates immorality and corruption and brings unjust suffering on a helpless widow.³² It is also important to note that while Judah undergoes drastic change in this story, we see no such change in Joseph. Judah transforms from a lustful, conniving opportunist to a humble, sacrificial caregiver. Joseph begins

³⁰ Longacre, 43.

³¹ Seybold, 61; Pratt, 216.

³² Pratt, 216.

his story with his character unclear and ambiguous, but at the first opportunity shows sterling moral rectitude. This might not be a change. It could just be a clarification.

5. Joseph's Inner Life

We do not often see the inner workings behind a character's speech and actions in the Bible. So when we are given information about the mental or emotional state of a character or their thought process, we should take note. This kind of information helps the reader move away from drawing uncertain inferences and towards gaining greater certainty.³³ There are two moments we will examine when we are given this kind of information about Joseph: first, when Joseph recognizes his brothers; and second, when he sees his brother Benjamin.

The first glimpse we have inside Joseph's mind is when he sees his brothers again for the first time in chapter 42. We are told in verses 8-9, "And Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him. And Joseph remembered the dreams that he had dreamed of them." This moment, along with the revelation that Joseph's brothers are being tested, sets up the events that unfold in 42-44. There has been no further mention of Joseph's dreams since his brothers mocked him as a dreamer when they threw him down a well. And although it may seem like his dreams have become true in this moment, in

³³ "With the report of inward speech, we enter the realm of relative certainty about a character: there is certainty, in any case, about the character's conscious intentions, though we may still feel free to question the motive behind the intention" (Alter, 116).

fact only the first of his two dreams may have been fulfilled in this moment.

When we return to this passage later, another question we will consider is if Joseph is also testing God to see if his dreams will be completely realized?

Another pivotal moment in the testing section of the story comes when his brothers return to Egypt with Benjamin and Joseph sees him.

And he lifted up his eyes and saw his brother Benjamin, his mother's son, and said, 'Is this your youngest brother of whom you spoke to me? God be gracious to you, my son!' Then Joseph hurried out, for his compassion grew warm for his brother, and he sought a place to weep. And he entered his chamber and wept there. Genesis 43:29-30

This insight into the heart of Joseph is the only moment in the whole story that explicitly reveals not just what Joseph was thinking, but what he was feeling.

There are many places in the story where we can take a good guess and be fairly confident that we can know what he was feeling, but this is the only moment we can be absolutely certain because the narrator explicitly tells us.

And it is no coincidence that the emotion happens to be compassion (literally in Hebrew, “his bowels yearned for him”). Clearly, he loved his younger brother, and he was quite possibly also concerned for his safety.³⁴ After all, if they had been so cruel to him, how much more might they do to Benjamin who was the only other son of Rachel, the only son younger than Joseph, and now unquestionably Jacob’s new favorite son? But Joseph’s compassion eventually extends out beyond Benjamin to include the rest of his brothers to save them from the famine (45:5-15). Compassion should be the rule by which we interpret

³⁴ “There lurked, also, a not unreasonable suspicion concerning his brother Benjamin, lest they should attempt something perfidious and cruel against him.” John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses called Genesis*, Calvin’s Commentaries, trans. John King (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 2:338.

Joseph's character at least from this moment onward, and perhaps a bit retroactively as well. All of Joseph's words and actions with his brothers should be informed by the narrator's unambiguous revelation that Joseph was moved to compassion for them.

6. Value Statement

It is both dangerous and easy to read Biblical narratives as morality tales with a moral or value that we must learn and apply to our lives. Typically this includes finding a hero to emulate who embodies the value communicated by the story and telling people to go act like that character. Reformed, christocentric, and grammatical-historical methods of interpreting the Bible often seek to rein in this moralizing tendency. The biblical authors themselves tend to steer the reader away from making hasty value judgments.³⁵ But every so often the Biblical narrative will do something like put a moral at the end of the story. That is what happens when we come to the end of Joseph's story.

Joseph's words to his brothers in 50:19-21 are a beautiful summary of the theme of his story.³⁶ And in them Joseph teaches his brothers and the readers of Genesis a lesson in trusting God's sovereignty and faithfulness to his promises. After the death of their father seventeen years since they moved to Egypt,

³⁵ "Good narrators are usually frugal with this; something should be left to guesswork. In fact, this process of weighing and guessing might be the very job the writer wants us to do. This draws us more actively into the story, so that we participate in the never ending debate between various interpretations... A good narrator does not want to make things easy for us by sermonizing himself all the time. He knows that in that case his text would be reduced to the level of didactics. He also wants to make us think, and the best way to do that is to speak indirectly and implicitly" (Fokkelman, 149).

³⁶ Longacre, 51.

Joseph's brothers once again fear his retribution, contrive a petition from their father that he forgive them and offer themselves as his servants.

Joseph wept when they spoke to him... But Joseph said to them, 'Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones.' Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them. Genesis 50:17b, 19-21

The moral or value we ought to draw from the story is abundantly clear: God's plan to preserve and bless his people cannot be thwarted by human evil, but rather God can use it to serve his good purposes. This lesson not only sums up what we have learned from Joseph's life, but also helps us understand the lives of Jacob, Isaac, Abraham, and even Noah and Adam. At every stage of Genesis after the fall we see God taking what was meant for evil and bringing good out of it. That good purpose is expressed continually throughout the lives of the patriarchs, but is rooted in God's original promise to Abraham: "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3).

This concluding value statement, coming from the mouth of Joseph, draws together the many strands of the story of Joseph and the story of Genesis and informs the reader what we ought to come away from it understanding something about God. Thus Joseph is speaking here not only for himself, but as a mouthpiece for the author of Genesis and an instrument for the Holy Spirit, making sure that we get the main idea. The fact that this comes from Joseph is not conclusive proof of his goodness as a character, because God does at times teach virtue through the mouths of those who are not virtuous (e.g. Judah). But Joseph does clearly demonstrate in this moment that God had given him the

ability to see his life from a divine perspective, which made him compassionate toward his brothers, ready to forgive them, and willing to provide for them and their families. And by providing for them, Joseph becomes the instrument of God's faithful provision in accordance to his promises. And so in his final touches, the author of Genesis characterizes Joseph as both mouthpiece and instrument of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob - speaking God's comforting words to his people, and generously providing for all their needs.

Chapter 2

Exegetical Analysis

Historical, Literary, and Biblical-theological Context

Having examined the characterization of Joseph throughout the narrative, we will now turn our attention to a few significant passages and verses that seem to not present Joseph in a favorable light. We touched briefly on some of these texts already, but now we will examine them in depth. These are Joseph's introduction and his dreams in Genesis 37:1-11, and key verses from Joseph's tests in Genesis 42-45. The aim of this exegetical study is first, to see what, if anything, these passages tell us about Joseph's motives in doing these questionable actions, and second, to see if and how the author of Genesis explains, justifies, or condemns Joseph's actions.

Before we study each individual text, we must first understand the context of the whole narrative - where it fits in the history of Israel and Egypt, in the literary structure of Genesis and the Pentateuch, and in the theological development of the Old Testament and the Bible as a whole. Much more could be said on each of those subjects than could fit in this thesis, so we will limit our exploration to only what is most relevant in helping us understand Joseph. Historically, this story recounts two important transitions in the history of Israel. First, it provides the background for how a nomadic family of shepherds in Canaan became a nation who "multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land [of Egypt] was filled with them" (Ex. 1:7). Secondly, and more

immediately, it explains why that nation left Canaan and migrated to Egypt. Joseph stands in the center of this story, both as the chief architect and instigator of Israel's migration, and the primary benefactor (acting on Pharaoh's behalf) who provided the food, land, and vocation for them to settle there and be prosperous.³⁷ In the broad scope of Israelite history, Joseph's time of slavery and sojourn in Egypt are a parenthetical aside explaining how the twelve nascent tribes of Israel were able to settle in Egypt.

In the literary structure of Genesis, 37:2 marks the tenth and final תלדת ("generations of...") in the book. By repeating this structural marker, the author of Genesis makes a clear break from the previous story to indicate the beginning of a new narrative, and at the same time links this narrative to the earlier accounts of the generations of, among others, Adam (5:1), Noah (6:9), Abraham (11:27 "Terah"), Isaac (25:19), and Esau (36:1). The author thus connects it to the flow of Genesis' history of beginnings and of the patriarchs. It is important to note that the author designates this narrative not as the story of the generations of Joseph, but of Jacob.³⁸ The story reaches beyond Joseph to include his brothers and their families as well - the whole family, or generations, of Jacob. This means that although the story focuses on Joseph and painstakingly tells the story of his life, Joseph is in fact not the exclusive protagonist; rather he

³⁷ For a discussion on the historicity of Joseph, see Ian Provan, V. Philips Long, Trmper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel*, Second Ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 174-176.

³⁸ "The 'Joseph Story' is thus somewhat of a misnomer for these chapters... Gen 25-50 (omitting chap. 36) constitutes the biography of Jacob: it begins with his conception in 25:1 and ends with his burial in 50:14. It is a story told in two parts: part 1, 'The family history of Isaac (25:19-35:29); part 2. 'The family history of Jacob' (37:2-50:26)." Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1994). 345.

shares the spotlight with his father. And in the broader context of Genesis, Joseph is the last of a succession of protagonists going back to Adam. It is important to keep this in mind as we look at Joseph because, while he is significant in Genesis as the concluding figure who literally has the final word (50:24, 25), his part is not as significant as that of his father, Jacob,³⁹ or great-grandfather, Abraham.

In terms of the literary structure of the Pentateuch, Joseph is the setup man for Moses and the Exodus. God's deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt is unquestionably the central event of the Pentateuch.⁴⁰ Israel's flight from the promised land and migration to Egypt for deliverance from famine is an inverted picture of the Exodus, when they are delivered from slavery in Egypt and begin their return to the promised land. Similarly, Joseph's role as a ruler of Egypt who brings the family of Israel out of the promised land into Egypt anticipates when Moses, a prince of Egypt, leads the people of Israel out of Egypt and into the promised land. Joseph thus points forward to Moses, the great deliverer of the Old Testament. In fact, this is precisely what he says in his last words: "God will visit you and bring you up out of those land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob" (Gen. 50:24). This means that Joseph once again plays a comparatively less significant role than Moses, who has the greater part. The point of these observations, which we must keep in mind, is that while Joseph is certainly the leading protagonist of Genesis 37-50,

³⁹ It is telling that in the only recorded instance God speaks to someone in the story, he promises Jacob that he will see Joseph before he dies (46:4).

⁴⁰ Michael D. Williams, *Far as the Curse is Found: The Covenant Story of Redemption* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2005), 22.

he is in fact a supporting character in the overall story of Genesis and the story of the Pentateuch. This becomes even clearer when we consider the biblical-theological themes that are in the story.

The biblical and theological context of the Joseph narrative is absolutely essential to having an accurate understanding of Joseph. Three themes stand out in this story: the faithfulness of God, the certainty of his promises, and the rejection and vindication of his servants. The first theme is by far the most pronounced. We have already seen the repeated phrase in chapter 39, that "the LORD was with Joseph" (vv. 2, 3, 21, 23). We also saw his understanding that God sent him to Egypt in order "to preserve life," (45:5, 8) and his consoling words to his brothers: "you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (50:20). But there is also Jacob's thanksgiving that God let him see Joseph and his offspring (48:11) as well as his testimony in his blessing to Ephraim and Manasseh: "The God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day, the angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the boys" (48:15-16). God's faithfulness is repeatedly highlighted, even though God's hand is often behind the scenes. That is why Kidner calls Joseph's story "a *locus classicus* of providence,"⁴¹ which is God's faithful working over, around, through, and behind the seemingly ordinary or even evil circumstances of everyday life to accomplish his plans and purposes. God's providential faithfulness is a theme that runs

⁴¹ Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1967), 179.

throughout the Bible,⁴² and it is the premise upon which the second theme is built.

The second theme is the certainty of God's promises. There are multiple layers of promises being made, kept, and sometimes broken by the characters in this story, but God's promises remain central to the story. Joseph's dreams (37:5-11) create the question driving the plot of the story - will these dreams come true? They do come true, of course, since it is what God promised would happen. They come true through the agency of other characters who keep their promises, like when Judah promises to protect Benjamin (43:9). And they also come true in spite of betrayals by his brothers (37:28) and the baker, his fellow prisoner (38:11). At the end of the story, when Joseph promises to provide for his family (45:11), this is to fulfill God's greater promises to his family.

Many promises are contained within the narrative, but there are also promises that both precede and reach out from it. Most importantly, God's promises to Abraham of land, descendants, blessing, (12:1-3) and a royal line (17:6, 16) all come closer to fulfillment.⁴³ Indeed, God's promises to Joseph of dominion, and to Jacob of reunion with Joseph (46:4), both function to partially fulfill these earlier promises. So do Judah's and Joseph's promises of protection and provision. All of these things come to fruition because God is working to keep the promises he made to the patriarchs. And the final promise of deliverance from Egypt and return to Canaan (50:24) points beyond the narrative to the ultimate fulfillment of those promises. But even after the exodus and

⁴² Ex. 6:2-9; Deut. 30:1-10; Ps. 100:5; Hos. 11:1-11; 1 Thess. 5:24; Rev. 19:11

⁴³ Bruce Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 491.

conquest of Canaan, God is not done keeping his promises. Instead he continuously acts to bless Israel as a nation, to prosper them, protect them, forgive them, and ultimately send his Son to them because he is the God who keeps his promises.

God's promises are certain because he is faithful. And that is true even when (*especially* when) it looks like his promises could never come true. That is why the third biblical-theological theme is important - the rejection of God's chosen servants.⁴⁴ As Stephen observed in his defense before the council, "And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt, but God was with him" (Acts 7:9). Moses was also rejected (Acts 7:35), and ultimately so was Jesus.⁴⁵ So Joseph can be seen as a character who reminds us of the suffering servant of Isaiah, one of the great messianic figures of the Old Testament which pointed forward to Christ.⁴⁶

By looking at Joseph in the broader context of Israel's history, Genesis, the Pentateuch, and the Bible, we come away with a sense that Joseph himself is less significant than what he represents. Joseph's story would have shown its original audience that they could trust the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob because he was faithful. It would have reminded them that even when it looks like God is absent and like his promises could never come true, he is in fact

⁴⁴ Kidner, 179.

⁴⁵ Stephen comes to a stirring conclusion: "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in hearts and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it" (Acts 7:51-53). Jesus also takes the Pharisees to task for their legacy of persecuting God's prophets (Matt. 23:29-36).

⁴⁶ The central texts of this OT theme are Isaiah's servant songs in Isa. 42, 49, 52-53, etc.

working behind the scenes, using even what is intended for evil to accomplish his purposes. Joseph himself becomes less of a lead character and more of an instrument or case study for God to demonstrate his care and provision for his people, and the absolute certainty of his covenant with their father Abraham.

Related to this, it is worth observing that the supreme theme of God's faithfulness comes across equally clearly whether Joseph is seen as righteous, or sinful, or complex. If Joseph is characterized throughout the story as a purely faithful and righteous man, that would not nullify God's faithfulness to him. As a good man caught in a seemingly hopeless situation, Joseph would still have been completely dependent on God's presence, grace, and faithfulness. God's faithfulness is evident in Joseph's life without ever having to expose his sin or call him to repentance.⁴⁷ On the other hand, if Joseph were guilty of maligning and provoking his brothers, disrespecting his father, and seeking revenge, the principle of God's faithfulness would still stand, because God changed his heart just like he changed his brothers'. And if Joseph's feelings and motivations are complex and ambiguous, God shows his faithfulness by taking what is flawed and broken and using it for his purposes.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ This is strictly in reference to what we see recorded about Joseph in Genesis 37-50. Undoubtedly, there were many unrecorded moments in Joseph's life when God would have done this.

⁴⁸ If Joseph is sinful or complex then his words to his brothers, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good," (Gen. 50:20) could be applied to him as well. If this is the case, the theme of God's faithfulness remains the central focus.

Exegesis of Key Passages

In this section we will take a more in-depth examination of two important passages: the introduction of Joseph and the dream narrative in Genesis 37:1-11, and key verses from Joseph testing his brothers in Genesis 42-45. The reason for looking at these particular passages is that they are where critics of Joseph often go to find fault and flaws in his character. The goal of this exegetical analysis is to see what the texts themselves say about Joseph - do they explicitly say he sinned? Do they attempt to justify or excuse him? Or are they ambiguous?

Genesis 37:1-11 - First Impressions and the Dreams

1. First Impressions (37:1-4).

The very first thing noted about Joseph is his age. We noted earlier in chapter 1 that this sets Joseph apart and places greater focus on him, since we are not told anyone else's age. But based on this information, we can approximate ages of his brothers. Jacob served Laban twenty years - seven years for Leah, seven for Rachel, and six for Laban's flocks (31:38, 41). Joseph was born at the beginning of those final six years (30:25). And Leah's last three children are listed as being born between Joseph and the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah (30:14-21). So it is likely that the rest of his brothers were likely in their early to mid-twenties at the time.⁴⁹ This age difference, although not massive, is

⁴⁹ Although Leah's children are listed before and after the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, there would have to have been some overlap with the pregnancies of these women and the birth of their children for all twelve (including Dinah) to be born in a seven year period.

substantial enough to emphasize by designating only Joseph as a boy⁵⁰ (נער) when he was with his older brothers.

Joseph's very first action in the story is significant. As he and his brothers were pasturing their father's sheep, something happened. But we are not told what it was. We are only told that Joseph "brought a bad report of them" to Jacob. Commentators are divided on how to interpret this phrase. Some defend Joseph: "Joseph's *evil report* of his brothers must not be judged by the criterion of group solidarity. The narrative, as usual makes no comment; it leaves it at least presumable that Joseph's first duty was to his father: *cf.* the obligation to testify in Leviticus 5:1)."⁵¹ Others point out the use of דבה as an indication of Joseph's guilt: "For some undisclosed reason, Joseph *maligned* his brothers to Jacob."⁵² While it is true that on almost every occasion this word is used in the Old Testament it implies fault on the part of the speaker,⁵³ other commentators

⁵⁰ ESV translation. Other translations include lad (KJV, NKJV, RSV, ASV), young man (NIV, CSB), or youth (NASB). There is an implication that he served or "worked for" (NLT) them (Kidner, 180).

⁵¹ Kidner, 180. Calvin also theorizes that "it was a complaint of the boy that his brothers vexed him with their reproaches" (Calvin, 259).

⁵² "The closest parallel to its use in Gen 37:2 is Num. 13:32, 14:36, 37 to refer to the bad report of the land that the returning spies spread throughout the camp." Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 406. Gordon Wenham concludes, "It is not clear whether Joseph's report about his brothers was true or not, but the term דבה 'tales' is always used elsewhere in a negative sense of an untrue report, and here it is qualified by the adjective 'evil' (cf. Num. 13:32; 14:36-37). So it seems likely that Joseph misrepresented his brothers to his father, his father believed him, and his brothers hated him for his lies. If this account was true, it would doubtless have enraged his brothers, especially since their father had never held them in high regard anyway" (350).

⁵³ Prov. 10:18, "Whoever utters slander (דבה) is a fool." See also Ps. 31:13, Jer. 20:10, Ezk. 36:3. The possible exception is Prov. 25:10, "lest he who hears you bring shame upon you, and your ill repute (דבה) have no end" (ESV; NASB - "the evil report about you").

point out that this by itself is inconclusive: “It is difficult to judge whether Joseph did this on his own initiative or was required to do it by his father.”⁵⁴

The context of this incident, however, gives us greater clarity whether it was “Joseph’s evil slandering about his brothers” or “Joseph’s report of the evil things his brothers did.” The first thing to keep in mind is that this event involves grown men and not children. Any talk of Joseph “tattling” or “snitching” as if it were some playground offense does not seem to do the situation justice.⁵⁵ The stakes were much higher than that - either Joseph was maliciously and intentionally spreading false stories about his brothers in order to hurt them, or his brothers had done something so wicked he had to report it.⁵⁶ The context will help us determine which of those was more likely.

The second contextual key is that Genesis is very clear about the character of Joseph’s brothers. Reuben slept with his step-mom (35:22). Judah was conniving (37:26-27), perverse, dishonest, and cruel (38). Simeon and Levi were cold-blooded killers (34:25-29). And the text is very clear that all of Joseph’s brothers could not speak peacefully with him (37:4), and they hated him (37:4, 5, 8) so intensely that they wanted to kill him (37:20) but were willing to sell him into slavery instead (37:28). In contrast, we have already seen how Joseph is characterized: as an honest and well-spoken man of integrity. If one looks at the whole context of the story, it is less likely to believe that Joseph

⁵⁴ John J. Davis, *Paradise to Prison: Studies in Genesis* (Salem, WI: Sheffield, 1998), 263.

⁵⁵ Waltke, 499.

⁵⁶ The adjective רעה emphasizes that this was “a really bad” or an “evil bad report”

maligned his brothers than that his brothers did something to merit being reported to their father.

The next item to consider in forming our first impression of Joseph is the coat. We have seen in chapter 1 how the coat and clothing in general function as a literary device, highlighting significant moments in the story. And Joseph's "coat of many colors" is one of the most well-known features of the story. However, the reality is that we do not know much for certain about this coat. We know that his father had it made for him because he loved him (37:3). It was unique, lavish, and set Joseph apart as the recipient of his father's special favor.⁵⁷ But we do not know what occasioned the gift. Nor do we know its exact significance.⁵⁸ There is even little consensus that we know what it was.⁵⁹ The phrase כִּתְנֵת פְּסִיִּם has been translated as "a coat of many colors," "a long sleeved robe," and "an ornamented tunic."⁶⁰ Different translations and interpretations of the appearance, significance, and occasion for the giving of the robe can lead one far beyond what Scripture says. More importantly, they distract us from what we are told about Joseph.

⁵⁷ Kidner calls it "ostentatious and provocative" (Kidner, 180).

⁵⁸ James Boice claims that because Reuben, the first born, slept with Bilhah he "had forfeited his rights, Jacob exercised his sovereign choice and appointed Joseph his heir. This is the true meaning of the 'coat of many colors.'" He also argues that this explains the earlier "bad report" brought to Jacob - such an action would have been expected of someone in his position. James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987), 3:19. See also Waltke, 500 - "By this regal apparel Jacob publicly designates Joseph as the ruler over the family."

⁵⁹ "What was 'special' about this tunic is uncertain" (Wenham, 351).

⁶⁰ Davis, 263. Also "a beautiful robe," (NLT), "a special tunic" (NET)

We can see that Israel loved him more than his other sons, that he was the son born to him (from Rachel) in his old age, and that he had this robe made for him. And then we are told that Joseph's brothers saw how much their father loved him more than them, and this made them hate him. In these verses we see that Joseph is completely passive. He is the object of affection, the recipient of a gift, and then the object of hatred. So while the coat is significant, its significance has more to do with expressing how Israel felt about his eleventh son, and helping explain why his ten older brothers despised him, but little to do with telling us what Joseph was like as a person.

These first verses that introduce Joseph to us do not give a clear picture of him. They are vague and ambiguous and do not answer almost any of the questions that they bring up: 'What does his age have to do with anything? Did he lie and malign his brothers or did he have to tell his father what they did? How did he act as Israel's favored son? What is this coat and what does it mean? How did he respond to his brothers' hatred?' On the other hand, the picture of Jacob and Joseph's brothers is abundantly clear, and it is not flattering. It seems as if the author of Genesis is doing two things: he is arousing our curiosity about Joseph by raising so many unanswered questions, and he is arousing our wariness of Jacob and his other sons by pointing out their wicked or foolish motivations. We have enough knowledge about Joseph's family to make a quick first assessment of them, but we have unclear or seemingly conflicting evidence about Joseph. The only solution then is to keep reading the story and come to a conclusion about him later.

2. Two Dreams (Gen. 37:5-11).

In the second portion of this opening section, Joseph relates his two dreams to his family and the author of Genesis records their reactions. It is important to keep in mind what has been stated already in chapter 1 - that this passage gives no clear indication of what Joseph believed about the dreams, or his attitude toward his father and brothers when he told them about them. Thus accusations that Joseph demonstrates smug self-importance and inflated ego as well as commendations that he exemplifies faithful prophetic declaration of God's revelation are equally conjecture based on information not explicitly stated here. But some things are clearly stated, which we should observe carefully.

First, the dreams were real. The root word dream (חלם) appears as a noun or verb in these verses eleven times. Ten of these come from the repetition of the verb-object phrase, "dreamed a dream." Twice the narrator tells the audience, speaking about Joseph in the third person, that he "dreamed a dream" (vv. 5, 9). Twice Joseph, speaking in first person, tells his brothers about "this dream I dreamed" (vv. 6, 9). And finally Jacob, speaking to Joseph in the second person, refers to "this dream you dreamed" (v. 10). Without reading too much into this repetition, it should be safe to say that the narrator wants us to

know that these dreams are not lies or figments of Joseph's imagination.⁶¹ Not only does Joseph claim to have had these dreams, but the narrator confirms that he did, and his father also believed he did. While this does tell us that Joseph was not lying (which may influence how we read the "evil report" in v. 2 discussed earlier), it does not tell us about his posture or attitude toward his brothers. So the question raised earlier about Joseph's honesty is partially resolved, the question of his pride and ego remains unanswered.

Second, the dreams are meant to get the reader's attention. Joseph's recounting of his dreams has an awkward but interesting feature that is repeated five times. Joseph says the word "Behold" (הנה) three times when he tells his brothers his first dream (v. 7) and twice when he tells them the second dream (v. 9). This word is a "particle of interest" that "calls attention to an object,... indicates a shift in perspective,... [and] has a strong 'overtone of feeling' based on its nature as an exclamation."⁶² The author of Genesis does not explain why Joseph was so intent on getting his brothers to pay attention to his dreams. Whether it was his ego, excitement, confusion, or a desire to share divine revelation, we do not know. What we can see clearly though is that Joseph

⁶¹ Wenham believes the text "makes it uncertain whether Joseph's dreams are revelatory or merely the product of his own inflated ego" (Wenham, 351). Keil, however, takes a much more nuanced view: "These dreams are not represented as divine revelations; yet they are not to be regarded as pure flights of fancy from an ambitious heart, but as the presentiments of deep inward feelings, which were not produced without some divine influence being exerted upon Joseph's mind, and therefore were of prophetic significance, though they were not inspired directly by God, inasmuch as the purposed of God were still to remain hidden from the eyes of men for the saving good of all concerned." C.F. Keil, *The Pentateuch*, Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes, trans. James Martin (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1981), 1:335-336.

⁶² Bill T. Arnold, John H. Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, Second Edition (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 168.

wanted to call attention to his dreams, which means the author wants to call our attention to the dreams as well.

Third, the dreams are easy to understand. For anyone familiar with Joseph's story, it is a very interesting twist that he does not interpret his own dreams. Later on Joseph becomes known for his ability to interpret dreams (40, 41), but here his brothers and father interpret his dreams (vv. 8, 10)! But this is not meant to impress on us their wisdom as interpreters of the dream, rather, given the context leading up to the dreams, we ought to be impressed with how self-evident and inescapably clear the dreams were.⁶³ The brothers need no time to ponder or ask each other or ask Joseph what it means. They immediately recognize it portends Joseph's "rule" and "dominion" over them. Similarly Jacob is instantly offended and rebukes Joseph for suggesting that his brothers and mother and father would all "bow down to the ground" to him. There is no mystery associated with the meaning of these dreams. The mystery is how their meaning will become reality.

Fourth, the dreams reveal a certain future. Perhaps the most striking feature of these verses, which does not stand out in English translations but jumps out in Hebrew, is the amount of doubled up and repeated words and phrases.⁶⁴ We have already mentioned the doubling and repetition of the root word for dream, as well as the repetition of "behold." In the first dream, "binding" and "sheaves" share the same root, and could thus be literally

⁶³ Davis, 264.

⁶⁴ This is not limited only to these verses, but is a major organizational feature of the whole story. "This striking symmetry and pairing in the account's style matches its theology; it subtly point to the unseen hand of Providence" (Waltke, 495).

rendered “binding bundles” or “sheaving sheaves.” The brothers respond in v. 8 to the first dream with a doubled question, each clause of which uses a doubled emphatic infinitive absolute for ruling (מלך) and having dominion (משל). Jacob’s response in v. 10 uses the same construction for bowing down (שתה). And that same verb was used twice before, once in each dream, referring to the sheaves (v. 7) and the stars (v. 9). Most fundamental, however, is the fact that there are two dreams, and not just one.

The significance of this excessive amount of doubling is explained later on when Joseph interprets Pharaoh’s doubled dream: “And the doubling of Pharaoh’s dream means that the thing is fixed by God, and God will shortly bring it about” (41:32). According to Waltke, “Dreams in this story come in pairs to show that the matter is firmly decided by God and will come quickly. An isolated dream might be misinterpreted. Two dreams with the same meaning confirm the interpretation.”⁶⁵ The point of all the pairing and doubling is to impress upon the reader the inescapable certainty of the future revealed in the dreams. But there is one more repeated phrase that has not been mentioned yet and one final observation we can draw from it about this passage.

Fifth, while Joseph’s beliefs and attitude are unclear, his brothers’ are explicit. The phrase that is repeated twice verbatim in reference to his brothers is that “they hated him even more” (vv. 5, 8 ESV). This phrase is fascinating for several reasons. First, given what we have just observed about doubling in this passage, the fact that this four word (in Hebrew) phrase is repeated twice should

⁶⁵ Ibid., 501.

give us a clear indication of its certainty and gravity. Second, the construction of the phrase is lost in translation. The first word, the verb $\eta\delta\iota$, means “they added to, increased, or did again.”⁶⁶ The second word, the particle $\tau\upsilon\epsilon$, means “yet, still, or again.” The third word, an infinitive of the verb $\lambda\omicron\nu\psi$, means “to hate.” And the fourth word is a contraction of the third person personal pronoun (referring to Joseph) with the direct object marker $\tau\alpha$. So a literal rendering would be that Joseph’s brothers “added yet more/increased again in hating him.” The picture is that their hatred is like a festering wound - continually swelling, growing, and being fed by them. Third, when taken in conjunction with what we see in v. 4 (“they hated him and could not speak peace to him”)⁶⁷ and in v. 11 (“And his brothers envied him”), the narrator gives an almost excessively clear picture of the thoughts, feelings, and attitudes of Joseph’s brothers toward him. This is especially noteworthy, given what we have already observed about the lack of almost any clear evidence about Joseph’s thoughts and attitudes up to this point.

This stark contrast between what is disclosed about Joseph and what is disclosed about his brothers should make it clear to the attentive reader that Joseph’s brothers are antagonists, and should not be trusted. This fits with what the context of the passage tells us about the brothers, which we have already seen. And even though the text does not explicitly make Joseph out as the hero,

⁶⁶ This word choice is a play on Joseph’s name, which shares the same Hebrew root (Wenham, 351).

⁶⁷ This refers, according to Keil, to “the usual salutation, ‘Peace be with thee’” (Keil, 335). The implication of this is that they disliked Joseph so much they would not even greet him in public. Wenham believes that “This remark thus foreshadows the whole story of Joseph and the loss of peace between the members of his family” (Wenham, 351).

the author is subtly moving the reader to start liking him and rooting for him because any reader who has compassion should be concerned for someone who is the object of so many people's hatred. Also, usually when the antagonist hates someone in a story, that person often ends up being the protagonist.⁶⁸

In conclusion, the opening verses of Genesis 37 tell us surprisingly little about what Joseph himself was like. But we are told a great deal about his family and how they felt about him, namely, that his father loved him the most and his brothers hated him ardently. We find out about one incident that could make us suspicious of him, but we are not given enough information to know if what he did was right or wrong. We hear him share his dreams, but we do not know what he thought about them or his attitude toward his family. But we have seen possible glimpses of his truthfulness and honesty, and also the clear prediction that he will inevitably gain the upper hand over his brothers. And, given how much his brothers hate him, we are concerned for him, and are being prepared to see him as the hero.

Key Verses from Genesis 42-45 - Joseph testing his brothers

1. First meeting (42:6-10).

By the end of chapter 41, Joseph has risen from slavery and incarceration to be the second most powerful man in Egypt (41:40-41). At this point the seven year famine foretold in Pharaoh's dream had already devastated much of Egypt and was spreading into other lands. And people were coming to Joseph for

⁶⁸ For more on the antagonists/opponent in Biblical stories, see Fokkelman, 95-96.

bread and to buy grain (41:55-57). Chapter 42 opens with Jacob learning there is grain for sale in Egypt and sending Joseph's ten older brothers there to buy some so they would not die of the famine which was now in Canaan (42:1-5). In verse six, the author of Genesis reminds us that "Joseph was governor over the land. He was the one who sold to all the people of the land." And in the next sentence, Joseph's first dream becomes true: "And Joseph's brothers came and bowed⁶⁹ before him with their faces to the ground." Immediately following that moment, we are told several things happen. First, Joseph "saw his brothers and recognized them" (v. 7). In order to emphasize that point, we are told again in v. 8, "Joseph recognized his brothers." But, on the other hand, we are also told "they did not recognize him." Secondly, Joseph does not reveal his identity to them, but instead he "treated them like strangers and spoke roughly to them" (v. 7). He then accuses them repeatedly of being spies (vv. 9, 14, 16), imprisons them three days (v. 17), and keeps one of them as a hostage (v. 24). These particular verses are problematic because it seems as if Joseph is taking out his anger and avenging himself on his brothers. But there are problems with that interpretation. First, it fails to realize that if Joseph really wanted vengeance, he was in a position as governor that he could have easily done much more harm to them.⁷⁰ Second, it does not acknowledge what his brothers openly acknowledged - that they deserved punishment for their sin against Joseph (vv.

⁶⁹ This is the same verb used in Joseph's dream.

⁷⁰ Kidner states, "the threats were tempered with mercy, and the shocks that were administered took the form of embarrassments rather than blows" (199).

21-22).⁷¹ Third, it does not agree with the picture of Joseph's character we have come to see over the previous chapters.⁷² Finally, this does not deal correctly with the third thing that happens at their meeting.

The third thing that follows their meeting is that Joseph has a pivotal moment of realization: "Joseph remembered the dreams that he had dreamed of them" (v. 9). This is an essential point to remember throughout the interactions that follow - that Joseph immediately understood that God was making his dreams reality. And while it appears the first dream had come true, the second mentioned "the sun, the moon, and eleven stars" (37:9), which Jacob correctly interpreted as "I and your mother and your brothers (37:10). Jacob, his mother,⁷³ and Benjamin are all missing. What, then, was Joseph to make of the second dream? Perhaps in what follows, he is trying to determine if or when it also would come true.⁷⁴

⁷¹ As Davis points out, "Their difficult situation caused Joseph's brother's to reflect, perhaps for the first time, upon their mortal conduct in years past, and they candidly admitted their guilt concerning Joseph (vv. 21, 22). It could be that this was the response that Joseph's tests were designed to elicit" (280).

⁷² "Perhaps Joseph was so tempted and spoke harshly out of his hurt and bitterness with a desire to get revenge... but if so, he overcomes the temptation, for his biographer does not characterize him in this way" (Waltke, 543).

⁷³ Commentators have many views of who this refers to. Keil argues it refer to "not Leah, but Rachel, who was neither forgotten nor lost" (335). Kidner, on the other hand, states this is "the only convenient designation of Leah" (181). Wenham believes this to be merely a formality, "the moon is included just to complete the picture of heavenly bodies" (352). Finally, Waltke assumes this refers to an undesignated surrogate mother figure (501). There is no textual evidence to settle this disagreement, but this author prefers Keil's interpretation because it would most likely have carried greater weight for both Joseph and Jacob.

⁷⁴ Hamilton argues, "V. 9a makes clear that the stimulus for Joseph's course of action in vv. 9bff. is not his recall of earlier mistreatment. By beginning as it does, v. 9a syntactically connects everything that follows with Joseph's dreams... The hardship of the past is forgotten. The dreams of the past are now recalled" (510). Waltke makes a similar point, "When the narrative is read as a whole, it seems apparent he constructs a series of events, in accordance with the dream, and in so doing disciplines, punishes, and tests his brothers to transform their character and to heal the rift between them and him" (546).

However, although I believe the text gives more evidence to see Joseph in a favorable light, the reader must grapple with the reality that Joseph's actions are still shrouded in mystery. Because whatever implications we might deduce from the text, the fact remains that Joseph's motives are not explicitly stated. Thus, Wenham concludes appropriately that "By failing to explain Joseph's conduct explicitly, the narrator leaves the reader to surmise and fill the gap himself, and this allows the creation of a multidimensional image of Joseph."⁷⁵ But in order to "fill the gap" correctly, we need to read more of the story.

2. The Test (42:15-16).

When we hear a voice or a loudspeaker or see a ticker text on a TV screen saying, "Attention: This is a test," we immediately know that in spite of whatever may follow, we should not be overly alarmed. The book of Genesis makes use of this kind of announcement in 22:1 where we are told that "the LORD tested Abraham."⁷⁶ This disclosure tips the narrators hand and lets the reader know that, in spite of what is about to happen, everything is going to be okay.⁷⁷ Even though Joseph is telling his brothers what the test of their honesty

⁷⁵ Wenham, 406.

⁷⁶ The Hebrew word used here is different (נסה), but its meaning, the effect of its placement, and its implications are similar. "The very idea of testing recalls God's testing of Abraham" (Hamilton, 522).

⁷⁷ In reference to how "test" is used in Gen. 22, "This word puts our mind at ease. It tells us that God does *not* intend the death of Isaac; he is testing the faith of Abraham." Frederick Holmgren, "Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah," *The Covenant Quarterly*, vol 39, no. 3 (Aug. 1981 - Feb. 1982), 77.

will be, the author of Genesis is also telling his audience that Joseph's brothers are not in any real danger.⁷⁸

The verb translated here as "tested" is בָּחַן, and it is elsewhere rendered "proving" or "trying." There are no other uses of it in Genesis or the Pentateuch, but it is used many times in Psalms and the Prophets, and once in Proverbs to refer to God testing men - their hearts and their ways.⁷⁹ It is used twice in reference to refining gold as a metaphor for God's testing (Job 23:10, Zech. 13:9). But it can also refer to man tempting or trying God's patience by their disobedience (Ps. 95:9, Mal. 3:10, 15). The sense this word gives the reader is that Joseph is being anything but vengeful or arbitrary, nor does he desire to do his brothers harm. Rather, the clear implication is that Joseph is carefully setting up these events to examine and uncover his brothers' true nature. This suggests the use of cool calculation and sound wisdom for which he was so widely known. This revelation to the reader that Joseph is testing his brothers uncovers a piece of his motivation in this narrative. It is an important piece of evidence that helps us understand him. But there are other pieces, and the next one we will see is perhaps the most important one.

3. Joseph's Compassion (43:30)

Since the previous passage we examined Joseph's brothers left Egypt and returned to Canaan, only to be forced to return to Egypt a while later for

⁷⁸ "Joseph had no intention whatever to administer to his brethren 'a just punishment for their wickedness towards him,' for his heart could not have stooped to such mean revenge; but he wanted to probe thoroughly the feelings of their hearts" (Keil, 355).

⁷⁹ Ps. 17:3, 139:23, Prov. 17:3, 1 Chron. 29:17, Jer 6:27, 17:10, etc.

more food. In order for Benjamin to come with them this time, Judah makes a vow to Jacob to guarantee his safety. Upon arriving in Egypt, the brothers are nervous, but Joseph puts them at ease. And when he sees Benjamin, he blesses him, and then has a strong emotional response. We saw in the previous chapter that this verse is significant. It is the only instance in the entire Joseph narrative where the reader is explicitly told exactly what Joseph was feeling - other places may show or describe his emotional state (i.e., weeping - 42:24), but no other identification of a specific emotion is given. So when this verse tells us, “Joseph hurried out, for his compassion grew warm for his brother, and he sought a place to weep, and he entered his chamber and wept there,” we ought to take note. Three observations about this verse deserve some comment.

First, the words used to describe Joseph’s emotion communicate strong affection. The noun, רחם, is the common word for a mother’s womb, and it also refers to the inner parts of a person that generate emotion (i.e. “heart”, “bowels”). The emotion being communicated here proceeds from Joseph’s innermost parts. And the verb כמר means to be kindled, grow hot, or to yearn. So the expression means that Joseph’s internal affections, his feelings of kinship and love were burning inside him, making him long for the object of his affection.⁸⁰

Secondly, we ought to note the object of Joseph’s longing is his brother, Benjamin. It was clear from the first visit, when Joseph assigned them their test,

⁸⁰ “His affection for his brother boiled up.’ The same idiom is used in 1 Kgs. 3:26 of a mother’s feelings for her child at the prospect of its death” (Wenham, 423). God uses a similar expression to describe his feelings for Israel in Hosea 11:8.

that he desired to see him (42:15-16). In fact, it is possible that this was another reason for the test.⁸¹ There are several reasons why he might have wanted to see him: because he was his only brother from the same mother, because he was concerned for his safety,⁸² and because he had to be there for Joseph's dreams to be fulfilled.⁸³ Also, as we will see in the next passage, the test he was devising for his older brothers required that Benjamin be present.

Thirdly, Joseph expresses his deep compassion for Benjamin by weeping. It should also be noted that Joseph does not only weep because of his feelings for Benjamin, but he also wept earlier when he overheard his brothers' confession of their guilt (42:24). He also weeps later in response to Judah's plea (45:2), and after he reveals his identity to his brothers (45:14,15). The clear message is that Joseph's compassion is not directed at Benjamin exclusively, but eventually to all his brothers. "Joseph's tactics are harsh, but his emotions are tender."⁸⁴

4. The moment of truth (44:17)

This scene in which Joseph tests his brothers one final time is by all accounts masterfully written. And Joseph's scheme having Benjamin arrested

⁸¹ "Joseph's test is clearly a smokescreen for seeing Benjamin" (Hamilton, 522).

⁸² Calvin, 338.

⁸³ Waltke, 543.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 544.

for “stealing” his cup is his “masterstroke.”⁸⁵ By pronouncing judgment only on Benjamin, and telling the others they may go free, “he puts them in a situation that replicates their situation twenty-two years earlier as closely as possible.”⁸⁶ The point of this of course is to see if they have truly changed: will they save themselves or act out of compassion and loyalty to their father and brother?⁸⁷ The result of this test is the stirring plea of Judah on behalf of Benjamin, which is the climax and turning point of the whole story.⁸⁸ There are two points to observe here.

First, by this point Joseph is clearly not intent on dealing out vengeance or even just punishment on his brothers. We have seen how, a very short time before, Joseph’s compassion welled up inside him so hotly that he had to hide himself and weep. And in this verse, he explicitly tells them that they are free to go in peace to their father. This follows immediately after Judah’s confession of their collective guilt in regard to Joseph and request for punishment with Benjamin in verse 16! But Joseph dismisses this request offhand. He is not concerned with that any more, rather his concern is to find out what kind of men they truly were, and what their feelings were toward Benjamin and Jacob.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Kidner continues, “Like the judgment of Solomon, the sudden threat to Benjamin was a thrust to the heart: in a moment the brothers stood revealed... All the conditions were for another betrayal, at a far more compelling price - their liberty - than the twenty pieces of silver they had once shared out” (204).

⁸⁶ Wenham, 425.

⁸⁷ Waltke, 561.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 558; Wenham, 425.

⁸⁹ “It would now be seen how they felt in their inmost hearts towards their father’s favorite... whether now as formerly they were capable of giving up their brother, and bringing their aged father with sorrow to the grave; or whether they were ready, with unenvying, self-sacrificing love, to give up their own liberty and lives for him. And they stood this test” (Keil, 364).

There cannot be any accusation that Joseph was acting vindictively or in anger at this point any more. To make such accusations, indeed, to even be questioning Joseph's motivations misses the point of this pivotal moment.

Our second observation is that the real question at the heart of this sequence of events as Joseph tests his brothers is not "why is Joseph doing this?", but rather "are they going to pass the test?" Just like the opening chapter of the story, we are given relatively little information about Joseph to understand what was motivating him or what he was feeling. But we are given abundant information about what the brothers were thinking and feeling, and what was motivating them. We should also remember how in the opening we are told, "these are the generations of Jacob" (37:2). This is not the story of Joseph. It is the story of Jacob and his sons. This is the story of how a broken and divided family are brought together and saved by the one son his brothers had rejected and betrayed. The point of this test is to see if Joseph's brothers are capable of being saved, not from hunger and famine, but from their hatred and callousness.⁹⁰ Because the test proved how they had changed, Joseph was finally able to reveal himself to them. And if this is what happens at the climax of the story, it encourages us to focus most on how Joseph's brothers changed over the story's course. Joseph might have as well, but the story fixes our gaze elsewhere.

⁹⁰ "It is to Joseph's great credit that he recreates the therapeutic situation that enables his brothers to prove their conversion to him and themselves. Fox comments: 'Some have questioned the morality of Yosef's actions... But that is not the point of the story. What it is trying to teach (among other things) is a lesson about crime and repentance. Only by recreating something of the original situation - the brothers are again in control of the life and death of a son of Rachel - can Yosef be sure that they have changed. Once the brothers pass the test, life and covenant can then continue'" (Waltke, 566).

5. The Reveal (45:1-15)

There have been several points at which we have pointed out that insufficient information about Joseph is given to the reader. While the feelings and motives of the other characters around him are clearly presented, his own internal life is often veiled. The reader is either forced to draw out implications based on evidence that is at times ambiguous, or must acknowledge that the text simply does not disclose anything. We have seen that by doing this the author of Genesis at times is inviting the reader to fill in the gaps for himself and come to his own conclusions about Joseph. At other times, however, the author may be subtly telling us that we should not be focused so intensely on him. But in this passage that changes. Joseph is no longer veiled, and as he reveals his identity he also uncovers his true character.

Following Judah's impassioned plea for Benjamin, which proved his brothers had passed their test, "Joseph could not control himself before all those who stood before him" (v. 1). He commands everyone to leave and begins to weep so loudly and openly that Pharaoh's household still heard him.⁹¹ "And Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?'" (v. 3) In this moment of revelation, Joseph drops his disguise. Throughout the story Joseph has been dressed and then stripped, and dressed again,⁹² but now he is the one who invites his brothers in close to see behind his mask (v. 4). This is Joseph's defining moment, he is revealing to his brothers and to the reader who he truly

⁹¹ The other two moments he wept were in secret (42:24, 43:30).

⁹² Dressed in the robe given him by Jacob (37:3), which his brothers stripped off (37:23). Stripped of his tunic by Potiphar's wife (39:15). Stripped again of his prisoner's garments (41:14), and then dressed in royal raiment by Pharaoh (41:42).

is.⁹³ Everything up to this point has been anticipating this, and everything that follows shows how Joseph's character is consistent with what is seen here. By examining his speech in these verses, we can come away with a clear picture of quality of Joseph's character.

First, we see his deep love for his family. Before and after he speaks Joseph weeps (vv. 2, 14,15), which we have seen is linked to his feeling of compassion (43:30). He inquires after the well-being of his father (v. 3), and expresses his desire to see him (vv. 9, 13). He speaks comforting and consoling words to his brothers, who were terrified and in shock (vv. 3, 5). He declares that his intention is to preserve the lives of his brothers and their families (vv. 5, 7). Second, we see his extraordinary faith in God's providence. He repeats three times that God is the one who sent him to Egypt (vv. 5, 7, 8), and twice that God had raised him to his powerful position (vv. 8, 9). And he lives out that faith by forgiving his brothers (v. 5; 50:19-21). Third, we see his wisdom and generosity - setting out a clear plan of action for his family (vv. 9-13) and promising to provide for them all (v. 11). Clearly such character qualifies as "above reproach." To suggest that just a short time before he was plotting how to exact revenge on his brothers makes no sense in light of this revelation.

⁹³ "For the first time he can be authentic; the once estranged brother can discard the facade and freely express his emotions within the family he loves. For the first time he shows real concern for the well-being of his father. For the first time he can interpret his narrative" (Waltke, 559).

Concluding Observations from Exegetical Analysis

1. Initial Evidence about Joseph's Character is Unclear.

The verses that introduce Joseph give us scant information about him as a person, so it is unwise to draw firm conclusions from them in regards to his character. While we saw that much information is given about his father's and brothers' opinion of him, as well as (by means of his dreams) potentially God's intentions for him, there is no clarity about his thoughts, feelings, or motives in all of that. And even though we are told about a real incident between him and his brothers in which he brought a bad report about them to their father, the author of Genesis leaves it entirely up to the reader to interpret it. Furthermore, the evidence is ambiguous. Linguistic evidence seems to suggest that Joseph was wrong in how he spoke about his brothers while contextual evidence suggests that his brothers probably merited what Joseph said of them. So the author may be inviting the reader see Joseph from two conflicting perspectives.⁹⁴ But he might also be signaling to the reader to wait and reserve judgment about Joseph until more evidence is given.

Similarly, the initial verses when Joseph and his brothers finally meet again are unclear about Joseph's feelings and intentions. Not until later, near the end of the first meeting, and again after the second meeting are we given much to go on (Joseph weeping and having compassion - 42:24, 43:30). And it is not until the testing is ended that we come to a clear picture of his intentions (45:1-15).

⁹⁴ Even if this is the case, the evidence given does not portray Joseph anywhere near the level of sin and wickedness as his brothers and father. His sins, if any, pale in comparison.

2. There is Abundant Evidence throughout the Story about the Character of Joseph's Family.

Given how little we are able to see into the heart and mind of Joseph, it is shocking how open and clear the author of Genesis is about Jacob and his other sons. When we first meet them, their hearts are laid bare for us: Jacob loves Joseph more than all his other sons (37:3), and Joseph's brothers hated him, could not talk to him, and were filled with jealousy (37:4, 5, 8, 11). Judah's corrupt character is then contrasted with Joseph's integrity in the parallel stories of Judah and Tamar versus Joseph and Potiphar's wife (38, 39). Later on the brothers openly acknowledge and confess their sins (42:21-22; 44:16) and are terrified when they learn Joseph is alive (45:3, 50:15). The sequence of tests further highlights how the brothers' hearts had changed. There can be little doubt that, while the author of Genesis wants to keep the reader guessing about Joseph up to a certain point, he wants there to be absolutely no confusion about the wickedness and radical transformation of his brothers.

3. The Evidence about Joseph Becomes Clear as the Story Progresses.

I stated in the first chapter that Joseph's behavior in Egypt may not demonstrate a transformation as much as a clarification of his character. I have also pointed out that Joseph's character does not necessarily have to change in order for the story to make sense. I believe the evidence we have seen supports this reading. Although in the beginning of the story the nature of Joseph's

character is somewhat ambiguous, when he is tested he proves himself to be faithful - to Potiphar, to Pharaoh, to his family, and to God. Joseph is clearly not the “sinner” some interpreters make him out to be. While it may still be possible to read him as a “complex” mixture of motives and emotions, the text simply does not give the reader any clear and explicit grounds to do so. This is especially noteworthy given how elsewhere the author clearly highlights negative aspects of other characters in the story. This in turn suggests the most natural reading of Joseph is to see him in light of those passages later in the story where the veil is removed and his true character is revealed. When we do this we see that Joseph is not changed in this story as much as he is vindicated. It is his family that needed to be changed, and not him. By the end of the story we have come to see that his character should never have been in doubt. While it is not always the case that we can read a character’s questionable actions at the beginning of the story in light of a positive assessment at the end of it, the above evidence suggests that is what the author of Genesis is inviting the reader to do.

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