

Sapiential Anthropology in the Joseph Story

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The Joseph story is one of the finest pieces of literature in the Bible. It is also one of the most theologically interesting and challenging texts of Judaism and Christianity. But what is this story actually about? How are we to interpret it? Historical exegesis has at times described its meaning as the voice of the Egyptian diaspora, advocating the legitimacy of Jewish life abroad.¹ Indeed, the Joseph story seems to serve as a counterpoint to the Deuteronomistic History, which claims that a good life is only possible within Israel and Judah's land and that losing one's land, as reported in 2 Kgs 17 and 25, is tantamount to the catastrophe *par excellence*. The Joseph story instead holds that diaspora life is possible, meaningful, and theologically legitimate. The Joseph story only makes three mentions of God on the level of the narrative itself, all of them occurring in Gen 39, the chapter describing the events in the house of Potiphar:² God was with Joseph (v. 2), and Joseph's master Potiphar – an Egyptian! – saw that God – the text even uses the Tetragrammaton – was with Joseph (v. 3). V. 6 even mentions

¹ See A. MEINHOLD, "Die Gattung der Josephsgeschichte und des Estherbuches: Diasporanovelle," *ZAW* 87/3 (1975), 306–324; *ZAW* 88/1 (1976), 72–93; R. LUX, *Josef. Der Ausgewählte unter seinen Brüdern* (Biblische Gestalten I; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2001), 237–239; J. EBACH, *Genesis 37–50* (HTKAT; Freiburg: Herder, 2007), 692–693; K. SCHMID, "Die Josephsgeschichte im Pentateuch," in *Abschied vom Jahwisten: Die Komposition des Hexateuch in der jüngsten Diskussion* (ed. J. C. Gertz et al.; BZAW 315; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2002), 83–118. See also L. A. ROSENTHAL, "Die Josephsgeschichte mit den Büchern Ester und Daniel verglichen," *ZAW* 15/1 (1895), 278–284; IDEM, "Nochmals der Vergleich Ester, Joseph, Daniel," *ZAW* 17/1 (1897), 125–128. For further references, see F. EDE, *Die Josefsgeschichte: Literarkritische und redaktionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur Entstehung von Gen 37–50* (BZAW 485; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2016), 514 n. 5. A different position is taken by E. BLUM and K. WEINGART, "The Joseph Story: Diaspora Novella or North Israelite Narrative?," *ZAW* 129/4 (2017), 501–521, see also R. ALBERTZ, "Die Josephsgeschichte im Pentateuch," in *Diasynchron: Beiträge zur Exegese, Theologie und Rezeption der Hebräischen Bibel. Walter Dietrich zum 65. Geburtstag* (ed. T. Naumann and R. Hunziker-Rodewald; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2009), 11–36, especially 20.25; J. WÖHRLE, "Joseph in Egypt: Living under Foreign Rule according to the Joseph Story and its Early Intra- and Extra-Biblical Receptions," in *Between Cooperation and Hostility: Multiple Identities in Ancient Judaism and the Interaction with Foreign Powers* (ed. R. Albertz and J. Wöhrle; JAJSup 11; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 53–72.

² On Gen 39 and its secondary nature within Gen 37–50, see T. RÖMER "The Joseph Story in the Book of Genesis: pre-P or post-P?," in *The Post-Priestly Pentateuch: New Perspectives on its Redactional Development and Theological Profiles* (ed. F. Giuntoli and K. Schmid; FAT 101; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 185–201, here 187–189; EDE, *Josefsgeschichte* (see n. 1), 105.

that God blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake, of course taking up the famous blessing from Gen 12:3. In other words, the Joseph story states here that Israel's God is also present abroad, and he takes care both of Israelites and foreigners on a global scale.

In addition, the Joseph story takes no offense at mixed marriages (Joseph marries Aseneth, the daughter of a pagan priest), which would be an abomination for the Deuteronomists. One could even characterize the Joseph story as an "anti-Deuteronomistic History" that allows whatever the Deuteronomistic History forbids. It is, so to speak, one of the liberal voices in Genesis–2 Kings. The apocryphal novel of Joseph and Aseneth, which may date to the first century BCE, deals with the theological difficulties that the biblical Joseph story poses and recounts how Aseneth gets rid of all her Egyptian idols and converts to Judaism before marrying Joseph.

However, this historical approach is just one possible angle for interpreting the Joseph story. This text is of course more than a political statement of the Egyptian Jewish diaspora, which, as can be deduced from the so-called Passover letter in the Elephantine papyri, originated during or even prior to the seventh century BCE.

The Joseph story contains other topics deserving of our attention as well. This essay discusses the story's anthropology: How does the Joseph story depict its main characters and their development, and what anthropological insights can one gain from this approach? As will become clear, this question pertains to what is at times identified as the sapiential imprint of the Joseph story.

To begin, a common misunderstanding of the Joseph story should be addressed.³ It is *not* about a morally ideal Joseph that becomes the victim of his morally deprived brothers and then forgives them. Instead, it is about human characters that the narratives portray throughout as *developing* – and this is true for both Joseph and his brothers. Humans are ambivalent by nature, and their character changes over time.

Such an ambiguous characterization seems especially difficult to prove for Joseph, the seemingly stellar hero of the story. Yet it is both possible and necessary to get a more nuanced impression of his portrayal in the narrative. I shall demonstrate this concentrating on an often neglected element in the story, Joseph's second dream in Gen 37.

As is well known, Joseph reports two dreams to his brothers at the beginning of the story.⁴ The first one deals with the brothers' sheaves bowing down before

³ See K. SCHMID, "Josephs zweiter Traum: Beobachtungen zu seiner literarischen Funktion und sachlichen Bedeutung in der Josephsgeschichte (Gen 37–50)," ZAW 128/3 (2016), 374–388.

⁴ See J. LANCKAU, *Der Herr der Träume. Eine Studie zur Funktion des Traumes in der Josephsgeschichte der Hebräischen Bibel* (ATANT 85; Zurich: TVZ, 2006), 168–175. See also R. PIRSON, *The Lord of the Dreams: A Semantic and Literary Analysis of Genesis 37–50* (JSOTSup 355; London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 50–52; J.-D. DÖHLING, "Die Herrschaft erträumen,

Joseph's sheaf. The second one reports that twelve stars, the sun, and the moon bow down to Joseph. A number of commentators have evaluated these two dreams as redundant. Hermann Gunkel, for instance, writes:

“Beide Träume bedeuten dasselbe; möglich, daß der Erzähler bei der Doppelzahl der Träume an die *beiden* Reisen der Brüder nach Ägypten gedacht hat.” “Both dreams carry the same meaning, it is possible the narrator thought of the *two* journeys of the brothers to Egypt by doubling the dreams.”⁵

Especially in German scholarship, these evaluations have even led to composition-critical judgments that remove the second dream from the original story. This issue will be discussed below.

But first, we will have to take a closer look at these dreams. The first dream unfolds as follows:

Gen 37:5 Once Joseph had a dream,
and when he told it to his brothers,
they hated him even more.

37:6 He said to them,
“Listen to this dream
that I dreamed.

37:7 Behold, we were
binding sheaves in the field.
And behold, my sheaf rose
and stood upright;
and behold, your sheaves gathered around
it, and bowed down to my sheaf.”

37:8 His brothers said to him, “Are you
indeed to reign as king over us?
Are you indeed to have dominion over us?”
So they hated him even more
because of his dreams and his words.

ויהלם יוסף חלום
ויגד לאחיו
ויוספו עוד שנא אתו
ויאמר אליהם
שמעו נא החלום הזה
אשר חלמתי
והנה אנחנו
מאלמים אלמים בתוך השדה
והנה קמה אלמתי
וגם נצבה
והנה תסבינה אלמתיכם
ותשתחוין לאלמתי
ויאמרו לו אחיו
המלך תמלך עלינו
אם משול תמשל בנו
ויוספו עוד שנא אתו
על חלמתי ועל דבריו

This dream is framed by two references to the brothers' hatred of Joseph in 37:5, 8. There is even a pun in the Hebrew wording of “they hated him even more”: **ויוספו** **עוד שנא אתו**, which creates a word play with the proper name “Joseph.”

Two aspects in the dream are especially noteworthy. First, the dream seems to require no explanation or interpretation. According to the reaction of the brothers, they immediately get the point – namely, that Joseph will have dominion over them. The brothers also take action against the dream's possible fulfillment. This takes me immediately to the second point. This dream is the central, driving force for what is to come in the Joseph story, precisely *because* Joseph's brothers

die Träume beherrschen: Herrschaft, Traum und Wirklichkeit in den Josefsträumen (Gen 37,5–11) und der Israel-Josefsgeschichte,” *BZ* 50/1 (2006), 1–30.

⁵ H. GUNKEL, *Genesis* (3rd ed.; HKAT I/1; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1910), 404, italics original.

seek to prevent the dream from coming true. Or to state it even more directly, in the brothers' very efforts to hinder the dream's fulfillment, they enable it to come true. Specifically, the brothers' attempt to kill Joseph actually helps Joseph advance to the position of vizier in Egypt. However, he never becomes "king" over his brothers, which is their concern in 37:8.

This motif of an oracle or dream that comes true through someone's effort to thwart it is common in ancient storytelling, but it especially recalls the story of King Oedipus, whose father Laius abandoned him as a baby in order to prevent an oracle from coming true. In the end, the oracle is fulfilled because of this abandonment. Only *because* Oedipus did not grow up with his parents was he able to murder his father and marry his mother.

Reading on, there is a small detail in Gen 37 that is often overlooked but which bears great significance for the narrative development of the dreams' fulfillment. In Gen 37:14, Joseph is sent by his father Jacob to his brothers in order to check on their "shalom."

Gen 37:14 So he said to him,	ויאמר לו
"Go now, see if it is well	לך נא ראה את שלום
with your brothers and with the flock; and	אחיך ואת שלום הצאן
bring word back to me."	והשבני דבר
So he sent him from the valley of Hebron.	וישלחהו מעמק חברון
He came to Shechem,	ויבא שכמה
37:15 and a man found him	וימצאהו איש
as he was lost in the fields;	והנה תעה בשדה
the man asked him,	וישאלהו האיש לאמר
"What are you seeking?"	מה תבקש
37:16 He said "I am seeking my brothers,	ויאמר את אחי אנכי מבקש
tell me, please,	הגידה נא לי
where they are pasturing the flock."	איפה הם רעים
37:17 The man said,	ויאמר האיש
"They have gone away,	נסעו מזה
for I heard them say,	כי שמעתי אמרים
'Let us go to Dothan.'"	נלכה דתינה
So Joseph went after his brothers,	וילך יוסף אחר אחיו
and found them at Dothan.	וימצאם בדתן

This short scene of Joseph searching for his brothers and briefly conversing with "a man" seems to be strange, even superfluous, within the overall Joseph story. Nevertheless, it highlights a specific question that readers might have concerning Joseph's fate: Why did God not prevent Joseph from being endangered by his brothers? This little passage seems to provide an answer. God not only permitted Joseph to engage in a possibly lethal interaction with his brothers, but even sent Joseph deliberately into their arms.

Why is this so? As Benno Jacob and others have suggested, this “man” who sends Joseph to his brothers seems to be divine.⁶ In various ways, he resembles figures similar to what one finds in Gen 18:2; Gen 32:23–33; and Josh 5. These figures are also called “men,” but they are in fact divine messengers (cf. Gen 16:7). While this little scene in ch. 37 is somewhat enigmatic, the “man” here, to my mind, is indeed best interpreted as a divine figure. This conclusion receives further support from the fact that Joseph does not merely “meet” him. Rather, the man “finds” Joseph, just as Joseph in the end “finds” his brothers. If this reading is correct, then according to this passage, *God himself* provides Joseph with directions for finding his potential murderers.

Readers of the story must exercise considerable patience before learning that Joseph’s distress serves the greater good of Israel’s survival during the seven years of famine that later occur. At any rate, this small narrative detail highlights that the Joseph story appears to deny the view that anything happening in this world, however cruel, might simply result from an oversight on God’s part. On the contrary, God can be perceived even behind actions and events that most people would probably dissociate from him completely. God is the sovereign ruler of the world acting wisely and secretly in the background.

Back to Joseph’s initial dreams. Here is his second dream:

Gen 37:9: And he had another dream, and told it to his brothers, saying,	ויחלם עוד חלום אחר ויספר אתו לאחיו ויאמר
“Look, I have had another dream: behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me.”	הנה חלמתי חלום עוד והנה השמש והירח ואחד עשר כוכבים משתחוים לי
37:10 But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him, and said to him,	ויספר אל אביו ואל אחיו ויגער בו אביו ויאמר לו
“What kind of dream is this that you dreamt? Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow to the ground before you?”	מה החלום הזה אשר חלמת הבוא נבוא אני ואמך ואחיד להשתחות לך ארצה
37:11 So his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.	ויקנאו בו אחיו ואביו שמר את הדבר

This second dream has received little attention in scholarship. Scholars usually consider it a doubling of the first one. As stated earlier, especially German-speaking scholars have proposed its removal based on “*Literarkritik*,” which means literary-criticism or, perhaps more unambiguous for an English-speaking

⁶ B. JACOB, *Das erste Buch der Tora. Genesis* (Berlin: Schocken Verlag, 1934), 703. See also EDE, *Josefsgeschichte* (see n. 1), 29 n. 26.

context, composition- or source-criticism. I will illustrate this by tracing Christoph Levin's approach to the dream. He interprets it as an "awkward duplication" ("ungeschickte Verdoppelung")⁷ of the first dream which, according to Levin, is *also* a later addition to the original Joseph story. Reinhard Kratz more recently follows his conclusion and so does Franziska Ede.⁸ Levin's, Kratz's, and Ede's reading results in a simplification of the Joseph story in both narrative and theological terms that to my mind remains unconvincing. The dreams in the Joseph story are an essential narrative constituent of the plot and cannot be removed from it without damaging the whole narrative.⁹

This is also true for Joseph's second dream in Gen 37. Upon closer examination, it becomes clear that this second dream is a literary entity in its own right and not just a duplication of the first dream. Each dream fulfills important narrative functions within the overall story.

In order to describe them, it is helpful to identify the differences between the first and second dream in Gen 37.

Joseph's first dream consists of three scenes, each of which is introduced by הנה, "behold." Joseph's second dream includes only one scene and is likewise introduced by הנה "behold." Yet this point is only formal. What is more important are the differences in the dreams' content.

In Joseph's first dream, everyone involved is portrayed as a sheaf. The eleven sheaves representing Joseph's brothers bow down in front of Joseph's sheaf.

In his second dream, in addition to the brothers, who are represented here by eleven stars, Joseph's parents are present as images of the sun and moon. However, Joseph appears as himself: "The sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down *to me*." The heavenly bodies are bowing down *to Joseph*, not to another star representing Joseph.

A final difference involves the fact that Jacob rebukes his son on account of the second dream because it depicts the parents paying honor to Joseph: "What kind of dream is this that you have had? Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow to the ground before you?" Such reverence is apparently unthinkable for Joseph's father, Jacob.¹⁰

⁷ C. LEVIN, *Der Jahwist* (FRLANT 157; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), 272.

⁸ R.G. KRATZ, *Die Komposition der erzählenden Bücher des Alten Testaments* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), 283 and n. 68; 324 n. 24; EDE, *Josefsgeschichte* (see n. 1), 49.

⁹ See SCHMID, "Die Josephsgeschichte im Pentateuch" (see n. 1); see also ALBERTZ, "Josephsgeschichte" (see n. 1). F. AHUIS, "Die Träume in der nachpriesterschriftlichen Josefsgeschichte," in "Sieben Augen auf einem Stein" (Sach 3,9): *Studien zur Literatur des Zweiten Tempels: Festschrift für Ina Willi-Plein zum 65. Geburtstag* (ed. F. Hartenstein und M. Pietsch; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2007), 1–20, wants to assign the dreams only to the post-P edition of the Joseph story.

¹⁰ As a quick note on Joseph's mother in the second dream, interpreters have often wondered how Jacob can speak of Rachel as if she were still alive, given that her death was reported back in Gen 35. Instead of discussing possible harmonizations, I assume that this narratological problem arises from the fact that the Joseph story did not originate as an appendix to Gen

But the second dream is most disturbing not merely because of Jacob's interpretation of it, but also because of the imagery itself. The scene of the heavenly bodies venerating a human being clearly has blasphemous overtones. It bears witness to a certain hubris on the part of its dreamer. As texts like Ps 148:1, 3 or Job 38:6, 7 show, if the heavenly bodies show reverence to anyone, then it is God alone.

Job 38:6: On what were its [i. e. the earth's] bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone	על מה אדניה הטבעו או מי ירה אבן פנתה
38:7 when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings/sons of God shouted for joy?	ברן יחד כוכבי בקר ויריעו כל בני אלהים
Ps 148:1: Praise YHWH! Praise YHWH from the heavens ...	הללו יה הללו את יהוה ... מן השמים ...
148:3: Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars!	הללוהו שמש וירח הללוהו כל כוכבי אור

Accordingly, Joseph's second dream not only overturns the parent-child relationship but also violates God's exclusive sovereignty over the stars. Joseph somehow dreams himself into a position that elevates him above his parents and which, on top of that, actually should be reserved only for God.

Taken together, Joseph's two dreams in Gen 37 share a common core – Joseph anticipates dominion over his brothers. The second dream, however, also includes some elements that go beyond the first one. The parents are part of the depiction; the specific imagery of the heavenly bodies evokes overtones of hubris; and Joseph appears as himself in the second dream – instead of as a heavenly body like everyone else in his family.

What, then, is the narrative function of Joseph's second dream within the overall Joseph story? Several points are relevant here.

First, it should be highlighted that, unlike the many other dreams in the Joseph story, Joseph's second dream is never really fulfilled. The parents never bow to Joseph. There is an enigmatic note in Gen 47:31b that describes the dying Jacob "bowing" to the head of his bed.¹¹ This occurs in the presence of his son Joseph, but it does not imply reverence to Joseph.

12–36 as, e.g., Reinhard Kratz holds (KRATZ, *Komposition* [see n. 8], 281–286). It was probably originally written as an independent novel, see in more detail SCHMID, "Die Josephsgeschichte im Pentateuch" (see n. 1).

¹¹ See LEVIN, *Jahwist* (see n. 7), 307f.; KRATZ, *Komposition* (see n. 8), 281; see also H. SEEBASS, *Genesis III: Josephsgeschichte (37,1–50,26)* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2000), 151; R. DE HOOP, *Genesis 49 in its Literary and Historical Context* (OTS 39; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 328–332.460–464; IDEM, "Then Israel Bowed Himself ..." (Genesis 47,31)," *JSOT* 28/4 (2004), 467–480; EBACH, *Genesis 37–50* (see n. 1), 521–522; DÖHLING, "Herrschaft" (see n. 4), 20–23.

Gen 47:31b: And Israel bowed himself
on the head of his bed.

וישתחו ישראל
על ראש המטה

How should we interpret this non-fulfillment? The Joseph story evidently attempts to show that dreams are not always heavenly revelations that can be trusted as such. They *may* contain human hyperbole that the dreamers add to their content. This point holds true especially for the parents' reverence toward Joseph in his second dream.

Another observation follows logically: Joseph's second dream seems to imply criticism of Joseph's character. According to the Joseph story, there is no black and white separation between Joseph and his brothers. The texts do not portray a perfect Joseph on one side and a rotten bunch of brothers on the other side. Rather, the often overlooked point is that both parties, the brothers *and Joseph*, are painted in an ambiguous light.

With regard to the narrative development of characters within the Joseph story, which ends in Genesis 50 with a reconciled family, this also means that the Joseph story recounts *both* the development of the brothers and the development of Joseph himself.

Let us look first at the brothers. There are many nuances among them. First of all, Benjamin holds a special position. Conspicuously, Benjamin makes his initial appearance in the Joseph story in the context of the brother's second journey to Egypt. As Erhard Blum has correctly pointed out,¹² the belated nature of Benjamin's appearance as a distinct character within the Joseph story arises from the specific focus of the narrator. Up until the second journey to Egypt – Benjamin is first mentioned in Gen 42:4! – the main divide occurs between the brothers and Joseph. For the sake of maintaining this narrative focus, Benjamin is not portrayed as a figure in his own right. This first mention of him is formulated in a highly noteworthy manner:

Gen 42:4: But Jacob did not send Joseph's
brother Benjamin with his brothers,
for he said
that harm might come to him.

ואת בנימין אחי יוסף
לא שלח יעקב את אחיו
כי אמר
פן יקראנו אסון

Benjamin is specifically introduced as "*Joseph's* brother" (singular), and then the text states that he was not sent "with his brothers" (plural) to Egypt. There is a double conception of brotherhood implied here. Being a brother to Joseph (of course, because they have the same mother, Rachel) is something different from being a brother to the rest of his brothers (having the same father, Jacob). We are not told whether Benjamin was part of the assault against Joseph in Gen 37.

¹² E. BLUM, "Zwischen Literarkritik und Stilkritik: Die diachrone Analyse der literarischen Verbindung von Genesis und Exodus – im Gespräch mit Ludwig Schmidt," *ZAW* 124/4 (2012), 492–515.

The text apparently has no interest in that question because it focuses exclusively on the confrontation between Joseph and his other brothers. We may assume *e silentio* that Benjamin either stayed home, or that he was too little to take responsibility for being involved in his brother's actions against Joseph. At any rate, the narrator first presents him to the reader in Gen 42.

Judah is also portrayed in a complicated way. At the beginning of the story, he is one of the instigators and is actively involved in the attack on Joseph. Over the course of the two journeys and Joseph's pressure to bring Benjamin along, he then develops into a responsible character who in his great speech of Gen 44:18–34¹³ – the longest in the book of Genesis – himself offers to stay in Egypt as Joseph's slave in place of Benjamin. His main concern in the offer is not for Benjamin, but for their father Jacob, as the concluding sentence of his speech highlights:

Gen 44:34: For how can I go back to my father	כי איך אעלה אל אבי
if the boy is not with me?	והנער איננו אתי
I could not see the evil	פן אראה ברע
that would come upon my father.	אשר ימצא את אבי

Judah's speech recalls an important motif that binds the overall Joseph story together. After Jacob learns of Joseph's alleged death, he is himself on the verge of death, bringing up a two-part question for the reader: Will Jacob ever see Joseph again, and will Joseph meet his father again before he passes away? In inadvertently returning to this very important point for Joseph, Judah triggers the following scene in Gen 45, where Joseph can no longer hold back his feelings and reveals his true identity to his brothers.

Let us turn finally to Reuben.¹⁴ He plays a special role in Gen 37, which depicts his efforts to save Joseph from his other brothers' attempt to murder him. These passages, however, are somewhat loosely integrated into their context. It may well be that they are the result of redactional reworking of the Joseph story that took place in order to mitigate the guilt of the brothers by describing Reuben, the first-born, as a potential but unsuccessful savior of Joseph.¹⁵

But what about Joseph? Genesis 37 introduces Joseph as the beloved son of his father. He is also privileged among his brothers: he does not seem to have to work. Furthermore, he wears a special garment that is otherwise only mentioned in the context of 2 Sam 13, where the princess Tamar also wears a *בתנת פסים*. The Septuagint translates as *χιτῶν ποικίλον*, a colorful coat. And he dreams his

¹³ M.A. O'BRIEN, "The Contribution of Judah's Speech, Genesis 44:18–34, to the Characterization of Joseph," *CBQ* 59/3 (1997), 429–447; J. JOOSTEN, "Biblical Rhetoric as Illustrated by Judah's Speech in Genesis 44.18–34," *JSOT* 41/1 (2016), 15–30.

¹⁴ See U. SCHORN, *Ruben und das System der Zwölf Stämme Israels* (BZAW 248; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997).

¹⁵ See, e.g., EDE, *Josefsgeschichte* (see n. 1), 34–37.

high-flying dreams for which his brothers and father rebuke him. So, Joseph is far from being a perfect character, at least at the beginning of the story.

His character develops over the course of the narrative, especially by means of how he deals with his brothers when they come to him twice in Egypt.

It is never explicitly stated what Joseph intends by imprisoning Simeon and by holding Benjamin back, but it becomes evident from the storyline that he carries out a kind of test. Are the brothers still the same as when they abandoned him in the pit? Or did they change? From Judah's speech in Gen 44:18–34, it becomes clear that Judah and his brothers are now ready to take on responsibility, both for their youngest brother and for their dying father. This brings on the peripety: Joseph is overwhelmed by his emotions and makes himself known to his brothers. Testing the brothers leads to Joseph's change and to their reconciliation.

The main passage in the Joseph story that deals with the formation of Joseph's character appears at the very end. After Jacob's death, the brothers fear Joseph's revenge:

Gen 50:15: Joseph's brothers realized that their father was dead, and they said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?"	ויראו אחי יוסף כי מת אביהם ויאמרו לו ישטמנו יוסף והשב ישיב לנו את כל הרעה אשר גמלנו אתו ויצוו אל יוסף לאמר אביך צוה
50:16 So they approached Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this instruction before he died,	לפני מותו לאמר כה תאמרו ליוסף אנא שא נא פשע אחיך וחטאתם
50:17a 'Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you. Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father."	כי רעה גמלוך ועתה שא נא לפשע עבדי אלהי אביך

We do not know whether the brothers fabricate this instruction or whether the narrative employs elliptic style (the father indeed had told them, but this is not reported within the story). The latter is more probable given the seriousness of the scene. At any rate, the brothers' plea including the report of the father's instruction seem to suggest that the brothers feel so ashamed that they do not dare ask directly for Joseph's forgiveness. What is Joseph's reaction?

Gen 50:17b: Joseph wept when they spoke to him. 50:18 Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, "We are here as your slaves."	ויבך יוסף בדברים אליו וילכו גם אחיו ויפלו לפניו ויאמרו הננו לך לעבדים
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Joseph is not angry, instead he shows compassion: He weeps. While the brothers do not ask for forgiveness, they offer themselves as slaves, just as Judah did in his great speech at the end of Gen 44. Genesis 44:16 הַנְּנוּ עֲבָדִים לְאֲדֹנָי (“We are here as slaves of my lord”) and Gen 50:18 הַנְּנוּ לְךָ לְעֲבָדִים (“We are here as your slaves”) are formulated as analogies, with the notable difference in how Joseph is addressed (“my lord”/“you”). Joseph’s astonishing reaction follows. He says to them:¹⁶

50:19: Do not be afraid!
Am I in the place of God?

אל תיראו
כי התחת אלהים אני

The reader can easily understand the introduction of Joseph’s speech: “Do not be afraid!” Joseph does not plan to punish and/or enslave his brothers.

But then he continues: “Am I in the place of God?” Why does he say this? It could be interpreted, firstly, as an answer to the brothers’ reported request for forgiveness: only God can forgive. But this does not seem to be the main focus of Joseph’s reaction since he has already told them “Do not be afraid!” One could therefore, secondly, consider the possibility of a self-critical evaluation of Joseph’s previous behavior in Egypt towards his brothers. He treated them ruthlessly and arbitrarily, like a tyrant treats his servants. But again, this seems to miss the point. Joseph’s remark instead builds a bridge back to his second dream in Gen 37, where he dreamed of himself in the position of God. The stars, the sun, and the moon bowed to him, and now he states, again in front of his brothers, “Am I in the place of God?” The answer to this rhetorical question is, of course, “No.” No, Joseph is Joseph, and God is God. Joseph’s answer in Gen 50:19 (“Am I in the place of God?”) thus reflects back on his second dream in Gen 37:9–11, which depicts Joseph as carried away by hubris. Joseph’s second dream is nullified by Gen 50:19. But in order to understand Joseph’s answer properly, one must read on:

Gen 50:20: Even though you intended to do harm to me,
God intended it for good,
as he is doing today,
in order to preserve a numerous people.

ואתם חשבתם עלי רעה
אלהים חשבה לטבה
למען עשה כיום הזה
להחית עם רב
ועתה אל תיראו
אנכי אכלכל אתכם
ואת טפכם
וינחם אותם
וידבר על לבם

50:21 So don’t be afraid;
I myself will provide for you
and your little ones.
In this way he reassured them,
speaking kindly to them.

¹⁶ See J. EBACH, “Ja, bin denn *ich* an Gottes Stelle? (Genesis 50:19): Beobachtungen und Überlegungen zu einem Schlüsselsatz der Josefsgeschichte und den vielfachen Konsequenzen aus einer rhetorischen Frage,” *BibInt* 11/3 (2003), 602–616.

Joseph explains why he is not in the place of God. The brothers intended to harm, even to destroy Joseph, but even behind these gloomy intentions, Joseph still recognizes God's plan to do the opposite – namely, to save his people.

Why does this statement immediately follow Joseph's assertion about not occupying God's position? What is the sequential logic between 50:19 and 50:20?

One cannot know for sure because there is no explicit explanation of the logic of this sequence. Nevertheless, the following seems plausible: When Joseph accepts his differentiation from God, he is able to discern God's guiding hand in the turmoil of history. Only by bidding farewell to his hubris is he able to gain true knowledge about what happened to him and his brothers. God is God, and man is man: That is a basic conviction of the wisdom tradition – one might mention Qoh 5:1 – and the Joseph story seems to draw on this sapiential insight.

Qoh 5:1 (ET: 5:2): Never be rash with
your mouth, nor let your heart be quick
to utter a word before God,
for God is in heaven,
and you upon earth.

אל תבהל על פיך
ולבך אל ימהר
להוציא דבר לפני האלהים
כי האלהים בשמים
ואתה על הארץ

One can identify another sapiential element in the Joseph story in Gen 50:20: the specific notion of how God acts in history *appears as an interpretation in Joseph's mouth*. The narrator could have addressed his readers directly to identify the moral of the story, stating something like, "Even though the brothers intended to do harm to Joseph, God intended it for good in order to preserve a numerous people, just as he is doing today." But he did not. He lets *Joseph* state it within the framework of the narrative: "Even though *you* intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today." What is the difference? The Joseph story does not present God's action in history *as a fact* about which the reader can be informed or not, but *as an interpretation* that is accessible and plausible especially for the character of Joseph himself. This is an amazing choice, and it again demonstrates the anti-Deuteronomistic shape of the Joseph story: In the Deuteronomistic History in Deuteronomy through Kings, it is a common occurrence to identify God's will and acts in history on the level of the narrative itself, as if it were an evident truth. The Joseph story thinks differently here. Perceiving God's hand in history is a subtle act of interpretation that cannot be achieved by everyone. The Joseph story appears to place this interpretation of history deliberately in Joseph's mouth. Why? Joseph is the main victim and has suffered the most during the events of the narrative. Therefore, no one other than him qualifies as a legitimate interpreter of his own difficult story that results from God's good will. The same interpretation in the mouth of the brothers, for instance, would be an insult. It is only possible for Joseph himself to make this statement. This essay does not provide the ideal context for a detailed comparison with other biblical formulations of God's action in

history that are similar or comparable to the Joseph story, such as, for instance, those found in Jonah, Deutero-Isaiah, or in parts of the wisdom literature. At this point, it suffices to introduce a general typology of theologies of history proposed by the Egyptologist Jan Assmann that might be helpful in order to interpret the Joseph story's position in this regard.¹⁷ Assmann differentiates between three different understandings of how God acts in history in ancient literature including the Bible.

First, many texts promulgate the notion of divine interventions, such as God's splitting of the sea in Exod 14–15 or God's sending down of fire in the story of the competition between Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel in 1 Kgs 18. Second, some texts view history as dependent upon a specific covenantal agreement between God and his people. Chief among them in the Hebrew Bible are the book of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic literature, which connect historical experiences of blessing and curse to Israel's obedience or disobedience to God's will. And third, we also find the notion of a divinely ordained history, as for instance in the book of Daniel or later apocalyptic texts.

If we compare the Joseph story to this conceptual matrix, it does not fit any of the categories very well. It views God's action in history as much more remote and intricate. Identifying God's hand in history is foremost a matter of interpretation that is placed primarily on the shoulders of the victims rather than the victors of events. Nevertheless, it is possible to say that the Joseph story presupposes covenantal interpretations of history, but it criticizes their point of view. Bad behavior such as the brother's is not always punished. It can instead be directed towards a higher good by God himself. The Joseph story does not yet witness to a fully ordained concept of history as known from apocalyptic texts, however. There is human freedom in history, but at the same time also something like hidden divine providence behind history. This point of view between covenantal and ordained concepts of history points to a date between Deuteronomy and Daniel, in absolute terms probably between the sixth and the fourth century BCE.

Why does the Joseph story formulate such a unique position regarding God's involvement in history? This approach results from its sapiential imprint. The Joseph story, at least in parts, belongs to the wisdom tradition. The literature of the wisdom tradition that is found throughout the ancient Near East and also in the Hebrew Bible is very reluctant to speak too bluntly with regard to God. God is God, and humans are humans. If someone were to try to infer a theology of history, then a sapiential approach responds with caution to attempts to construct or

¹⁷ See J. ASSMANN, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (Munich: Beck, 1992), 248–258; English translation: *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). See also K. SCHMID, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (NThG; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 287–307.

propose divine plans in history. Applying human wisdom to the problem of how God acts in history means at the same time acknowledging the limits of human wisdom in that respect. Therefore, the Joseph story concludes the following: Identifying God's hand in history is foremost a personal matter, not a matter of objective certainty. It is impossible to develop an overall conception of God's involvement in history. For Joseph, it is only possible to identify God's hand behind his own fate. His identification of God's providence has also required that he clearly acknowledges his status as a human – he is not in God's place, and it is because of this very awareness that he's able to recognize God's acts in his own life, though at so many times it may have looked as if he had been abandoned by God.

Finally, Joseph's transformation from a spoiled youngster to a responsible leader is also a wisdom topic: The story speaks of character formation through experience and education.

What is the position of the Joseph story within the wisdom tradition, and what does this imply for its dating? The notion of the Joseph story having a sapiential imprint at all has become a common assumption in scholarship ever since Gerhard von Rad.¹⁸

However, von Rad's approach was informed only by the few textual and thematic links he identified between the Joseph story and the early wisdom tradition. For instance, von Rad pointed out parallels between Gen 39, the story about the affair with Ms. Potiphar, and Prov 23:

Prov 23:27–28: For a prostitute is a deep pit; an adulteress is a narrow well.	כי שוחה עמקה זונה ובאר צרה נכריה
28 She lies in wait like a robber and increases the number of the faithless.	אף היא כחתף תארב ובוגדים באדם תוסף

Or regarding Joseph's talks with his brothers, von Rad hints at Prov 16 or 25, which appreciate the power of the word:

Prov 16:23: The heart of the wise makes their speech judicious, and adds persuasiveness to their lips.	לב חכם ישכיל פיהו ועל שפתיו יסיף לקח
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Prov 25:11: Like apples of gold in a setting of silver is a word fitly spoken.	תפוחי זהב במשכיות כסף דבר על אפניו
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Finally, von Rad saw a link between the so-called quintessence of the Joseph story in 50:20–21 and sayings like Prov 16:9 and 20:24:

Gen 50:20: Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good,	ואתם חשבתם עלי רעה אלהים חשבה לטבה
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¹⁸ G. VON RAD, "Josephsgeschichte und ältere Chokma," in *Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament* (4th ed.; ed. G. von Rad; TB 8; Munich: Kaiser, 1958), 272–280; IDEM, "Die Josephsgeschichte," in *Gottes Wirken in Israel. Vorträge zum Alten Testament* (ed. O. H. Steck; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1974), 22–41.

as he is doing today, in order to preserve a numerous people. 50:21 So don't be afraid; I myself will provide for you and your little ones. In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.	למען עשה כיום הזה להחית עם רב ועתה אל תיראו אנכי אכלכל אתכם ואת טפכם וינחם אותם וידבר על לבם
Prov 16:9: The heart of a human plans his way, but YHWH directs his step.	לב אדם יחשב דרכו ויהוה יבין צעדו
Prov 20:24: All the steps of a man are ordered by YHWH; how can a human understand his own way?	מיהוה מצעדי גבר ואדם מה יבין דרכו

Von Rad was interested in dating the Joseph story to the period of what he called the “Solomonic enlightenment,” and he therefore looked for parallels in the older wisdom tradition.

But as especially Michael Fox has pointed out, the Joseph story is more similar to the wisdom tradition as witnessed, e. g., in the book of Daniel than in the older parts of the book of Proverbs. Fox writes:

“The concept of wisdom in the Joseph story is affiliated with the pietistic and inspired wisdom of Daniel rather than with the ethical and practical wisdom of Wisdom literature.”¹⁹

However, in light of this analysis of Joseph's character formation and transformation as depicted in Gen 37–50, it is fair to say that the Joseph story combines the ethical and practical concept of wisdom with its inspired notion *by conceiving of the former as presupposing the latter*.

The Joseph story thus forms a bridge between the older and the younger wisdom tradition, pointing out the necessity of character formation in order to gain inspired and theological valuable insights.

Thus, the Joseph story does not seem to be as late as the Daniel narratives in Dan 1–6. It is still developing the intellectual notions of inspired dream interpretation in Daniel. Nevertheless, as a diaspora novella, the Joseph story presupposes the existence of Israelites or Judeans in the diaspora, which leads to a *terminus a quo* in 722 BCE. On the other hand, it cannot be later than the Priestly Code. Otherwise one would expect the Joseph story to create a smoother bridge between the Genesis and the Exodus traditions than it currently does. One can point out merely the divergent depictions of Pharaoh and the Israelites in Gen 37–50 versus Exod 1–15 and the narrative un-doing of the Joseph story in Exod 1:6–8. The connection between Genesis and Exodus is, by contrast, firmly established by the Priestly Code. Why would the Joseph story create narrative difficulties if it were a post-P insertion?

¹⁹ M. V. Fox, “Wisdom in the Joseph Story,” *VT* 51/1 (2001), 26–41, here 40.

This leaves us with a *terminus ante quem* in the late Neo-Babylonian or, more likely, in the early Persian Period. Since the Joseph story's final passages focus on the cohesion of all the twelve tribes of Israel, it is more plausible to date it after 587 BCE than between 722 and 587 BCE, but this issue remains open to debate.²⁰

However, how to date the Joseph story is much less important than analyzing and understanding its basic thoughts and theological sophistication. Nevertheless, it can help to recognize the historical framework of its ideas and thus gain an even better and deeper understanding of its ideas.

²⁰ See T. RÖMER, "Joseph Story" (see n. 2), 189–195 for an overview. Römer opts for a post-P date, whereas BLUM and WEINGART, "The Joseph Story" (see n. 1), argue for an earlier setting in the eighth century BCE.