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Genesis by the Numbers: A Reassessment of the Years of the Patriarchs, Beginning with the Joseph Story

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Abstract: Do the numbers of years in Genesis add up? Biblical scholars have learned to attend to the art of biblical narrative. Is there also an art of biblical numbers? If so, could its rediscovery lead to a better understanding of the contours of the biblical text, and its complex meanings, as well as its reception history prior to the Enlightenment? This article's provisional answer to these questions is yes. It looks at two key numbers associated with the Joseph Story: a span of twenty-two years, which a variety of readers calculate as the time that Joseph lived away from his family in Egypt; and a double span of seventeen years, which the Bible suggests is the length of time that Joseph lived under his father's protection in Canaan, and that Jacob in turn lived under his son's care in Egypt. The study finds that, since Spinoza, modern assessments of these numbers have been constrained by a strongly linear view of time, as may be seen in the work of Robert Alter, among many others. It criticizes linear time as reductive insofar as it flattens the numbers of Genesis into chronologies and timelines. It also draws attention to an aspect of figural time, which it describes as symmetrically folded time, to help characterize the non-linear, isotropic way that numbers seem to behave in the Bible and in the Bible's pre-modern reception. The findings about figural time in the Joseph Story raise significant questions about the compatibility of narrative, literary-critical, and theological approaches to the time-denominated numbers of Genesis.

Keywords: Genesis; chronology; time; source criticism; figural reading.

1 Context and Apology

The numbers of Genesis have been an improbable source of inspiration for some devout readers of the Bible. Abraham Yoon-sik Park, for example, published an account of the genealogies of Genesis as he approached the age of eighty, decades

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after he had established Pyungkang Cheil Presbyterian Church in Seoul, South Korea, as one of the largest churches in the world.[1] Park draws on notes from earlier sermons and talks, and he testifies to an even earlier experience of "grace that led [him] to understand the hidden meaning of the years of generations."[2] The study has few citations and does not claim to be a work of scholarship. Rather, it arises from a bibliocentric ethos that started for Park when, disillusioned by his experience of Japanese colonization and the Korean War, he lived alone in the mountains of Jangan and Jiri for three years while subsisting on little more than the Bible and prayer. He recalls etching notes on arrowroot leaves, which he skewered on sticks until he could transcribe the work onto paper.[3] Looking back, near the end of Park's ministry, what is "the hidden meaning of the years of generations"? It is difficult to tell when calculations of Noah's years relative to three antediluvian patriarchs are presented as their own reward. Simple proofs are given for how Noah, who was born 1056 years after creation, lived 126 years after Adam's death (1056–930), 69 years after Enoch's ascension (1056–987), and 14 years after Seth's death (1056–1042). These sums show which ancestors Noah could *not* have met, but as such they are curious auxiliaries to the point that "Noah lived at the juncture of two ages."[4] In general Park draws two theological lessons from a battery of calculations like these. First, the longevity in early Genesis begins to be cut short as a direct result of the world's disobedience at Babel. In other words, persistence in sin foreshortens life. Second, the Genesis genealogies show how the covenant people of God pull away from parallel generations locked in the curse of sin and death. The line of Seth stands in contrast with that of Cain, and the lineage of Abraham runs through Shem, not Ham or Japheth. Thus, the faithful in every age are reminded not to conform to the pattern of this world. And yet, while such lessons are tailor-made for the pulpit, Park's extensive calculation of years across twenty generations of patriarchs, keyed to the pivotal lifespans of Adam and Noah, seems to stand on its own merits, as a special kind of witness to the provident workings of salvation that lie hidden in the apparently disordered flow of secular history.

1 Abraham Park, *The Genesis Genealogies: God's Administration in the History of Redemption* (North Clarendon, Vermont: Periplus Editions, 2009). The church started as a house church with four members. Around the time of Park's death in 2014, the church claimed 70,000 members.

2 Park, *Genesis Genealogies*, 12.

3 Abraham Park, "About Author Reverend Abraham Park," *The History of Redemption Series*, last modified October 20, 2013, http://www.abrahampark.com/eng/about_author. "These pieces of paper helped me write the first draft of The History of Redemption series," he remembers. Versions of Park's legend of origin are recounted on a variety of church websites, many of which note that Park read the entire Bible more than 1800 times over the course of his life.

4 Park, *Genesis Genealogies*, 125.

Park, an inerrantist who is equally willing to draw support from the biblical critic E.A. Speiser as from the young earth creationist Henry Morris, appears unperturbed by fundamentalist controversies. He sees no need to project an absolute date for the creation of the world. He is innocent, too, of the textual problems raised by ancient witnesses to variant chronologies in Genesis, as preserved in the Septuagint and the Samaritan Pentateuch, and of any questions that might be raised by parallels to the Sumerian King List.[5] The same cannot be said for Larry Pierce, an amateur enthusiast of biblical chronology who, together with his wife, Marion, produced an updated version of James Ussher's *The Annals of the World* in 2003.[6] What was the impetus for a new edition? Ussher's chronology had long ceased to be printed in the margins of King James Bibles, and a full 345 years had passed since Ussher's Latin text (1650–1654) had been translated into English (1658).[7] Pierce acted upon the suggestion of Ken Ham, a prominent creationist who supported the work by providing photocopies of the originals, and whose apologetics organization, "Answers in Genesis," continues to promote and sell the resulting publication. Apologetic aims lead Pierce to editorialize directly within the body of the text, sometimes merely filling out references, while at other times engaging in rationalistic defenses of the Bible or even correcting "arithmetical errors."[8] It seems as if he wants to create an anti-critical edition of Ussher. His targets become clearer in a series of appendices directed at those who "try to harmonize man's conjectures with the infallible Word of God."[9] They include mainstream scientists, archaeologists, Latinists, Assyriologists, biblical scholars who do not consider the LXX to be error-ridden and irrelevant to

5 The Sumerian King List is available through the Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature (etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk) as a transliteration (c.2.1.1) and a translation (t.2.1.1), and in partial translation in ANET, 265–6. It catalogs antediluvian reigns that last as long as 43,200 years, but that, as in Genesis, fall off sharply after the flood.

6 James Ussher, *The Annals of the World*, ed. Larry Pierce and Marion Pierce (Green Forest, Arkansas: Master Books, 2003).

7 James Ussher, *The Annals of the World: Deduced from The Origin of Time, and continued to the beginning of the Emperor Vespasian's Reign, and the totall Destruction and Abolition of the Temple and Common-wealth of the Jews* (London: Tyler, Crook, and Bedell, 1658), and the Latin original, are available online at archive.org. I was able to consult hard copies of both at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.

8 Ussher, *Annals*, ed. Pierce and Pierce, 6. Larry Pierce finds only a few minor errors in Ussher himself (paras. 874, 877), and is more likely to point out numerical irregularities in the Loeb Classical Library, which he uses to check Ussher's sources (paras. 1284, 2826, 4838, 6165). Especially in the early chapters of Genesis, Pierce inserts gratuitous comments and jokes (paras. 7, 13, 33). Still more baffling is Isaac Newton, *Newton's Revised History of Ancient Kingdoms: A Complete Chronology*, ed. Larry Pierce and Marion Pierce (Green Forest, Arkansas: Master Books, 2009), which occasionally revises Newton's chronology to better conform with Ussher's earlier timeline.

9 Pierce and Pierce, *Annals*, 893.

the study of true biblical chronology, and even traditional Jews who follow the Seder Olam Rabbah and therefore reckon with a world that is some 243 years *younger* than the one imagined by Archbishop Ussher. Pierce is not innocent of these complications. Unlike Park, whose personal and pastoral interest in chronology draws him deep into the world of the Bible itself, Pierce engages in *ad hominem* attacks against a startling range of people whom he dismisses as misguided skeptics and scoffers.

If twenty-first century works of biblicist chronology are thus credulous at best, or else apt to be judged on a sliding scale between dangerous and silly, it is perhaps little wonder that biblical scholars tend to pass over the numbers of Genesis quickly, if they address them at all. Three recent examples of work by leading scholars will suffice to create a general picture. First is Walter Moberly's *The Theology of the Book of Genesis* (2009).[10] The book's condensed format requires its author to be highly selective with his material, and he sensibly chooses to be guided by historic reception and contemporary use. A focus on the best known passages leads to chapter-length discussions of Genesis 1, 2–3, 4, 6–9, 12 (twice), 22, and some longer narrative sections, but necessitates the neglect of, among other things, the genealogical material in Genesis 5, 10, and 11. When released from the need to be comprehensive, Moberly is drawn away from precisely those texts that are of most interest to the chronologists.[11] Second, Iain Provan makes the unusual decision to organize *Discovering Genesis* (2016) around the Priestly *toledot* formulas that comprise the genealogical spine of Genesis.[12] From the Prologue (1:1–2:3) to the Joseph Story (37:2–50:26), he presents a series of twelve "acts" in a drama that runs from the creation of the world to the arrival of the people of Israel in Egypt. Even so, Provan's treatment of the line of Adam in Gen 5:1–6:8 ("Act 3") finds no particular narrative or theological significance in the genealogy there. It does not mention the specific age of a single ancestor, offering instead a curt gloss of the detail provided by the biblical narrator: "a long time passed."[13] Third, Ronald Hendel's *The Book of Genesis: A Biography* (2013) tells the story of an ancient, tribal book marked by a "harsh realism" that was

10 R. W. L. Moberly, *The Theology of the Book of Genesis*, Old Testament Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

11 Minor exceptions arise incidentally, as in an argument justifying a synchronic reading of the flood story (Moberly, *Theology of Genesis*, 105). Here the specific duration of the flood is treated not as a matter of broad concern, but as the domain of specialists. However, see R. W. L. Moberly, "Pentateuch," in *New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Vol 4: Me–R*, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009), 432–33 for an account of the problems that numbers raise in pentateuchal studies. See also R. W. L. Moberly, *Old Testament Theology: Reading the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 89–90, for a discussion of the implausible number of Israelites in the Exodus.

12 Iain Provan, *Discovering Genesis: Content, Interpretation, Reception* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).

13 Provan, *Discovering Genesis*, 108.

subsumed under figural interpretation in late antiquity, an unfortunate condition that persisted through the early modern age.[14] The culprits here – vast centuries of platonic and apocalyptic readers who disfigure the Bible's plain sense – receive a decisive answer in the late modern turn away from the figural and back to the real, a move pioneered by Erich Auerbach and refined by Hendel's colleague Robert Alter. Hendel has more than a little to say about biblical chronology, but his main theme here is how it occasions the ridicule that helps expose the irrelevance of Genesis to the cosmic ordering of a world best explained by reason and science.[15] On this account, the years of the patriarchs become the vanguard of disenchantment. The numbers of Genesis still have a role to play in biblical scholarship, but their domain is restricted to specialist discourse, or else narrowly conceived as part of the educator's perennial task of disabusing religious conservatives of their false attachments to scripture. They no longer hold the general interest.

With conditions like these, why bother with the numbers of Genesis at all? There seem to be several reasons to avoid them. By reputation they are extremely dull. Also, the field of study is crowded with hobbyists and sectarians. Apart from a handful of specialists, the same area is also largely empty of competent biblical scholars, leaving the would-be student of chronology with few good dialogue partners. Moreover, it is not clear whether there is much new to say about the numbers, or at least much new that can *reliably* be said. Gerhard Larsson has written more on the subject than most, with two monographs and about a dozen articles in top journals.[16] His approach to biblical chronology has the advantage

14 Ronald S. Hendel, *The Book of Genesis: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 9.

15 Hendel, *Book of Genesis*, 17, 129–37, 140, 174, 176–82. His parade example is François Rabelais' genealogy of Gargantua and Pantagruel. For his more technical work on the Genesis chronology see Ronald S. Hendel, "4Q252 and the Flood Chronology of Genesis 7–8: A Text-Critical Solution," *DSD (Dead Sea Discoveries)* 2, no. 1 (1995), 72–9; Ronald S. Hendel, *The Text of Genesis 1–11: Textual Studies and Critical Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Ronald S. Hendel, "A Hasmonean Edition of MT Genesis?: The Implications of the Editions of the Chronology in Genesis 5," *HeBAI (Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel)* 1, no. 4 (2012), 448–64.

16 See esp. Gerhard Larsson, *The Secret System: A Study in the Chronology of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1973); Gerhard Larsson, *The Chronological System of the Old Testament* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2008). He writes as a non-specialist with a strong background in mathematics. His main career was as a surveyor and professor of land management at the Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm, which may explain why his appeal for more quantitative research in biblical studies has found so little support. See Gerhard Larsson, "More Quantitative Old Testament Research?," *ZAW (Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft)* 110, no. 4 (1998), 570–80. While it is unlikely that he will be remembered as the next Jean Astruc, his biblical scholarship has cleared the bar of peer review often enough to merit a hearing. Also, he is ahead of his time in arguing for a late date for P (the Priestly material), or at least the part of P he calls C (for Chronology), which he places sometime shortly after 238 BCE.

of treating it as a pure system, meaning that it has no necessary relationship to a "real" historical timeline. But the cool reception of his work underscores a problem common to any purported discovery of ancient secrets in biblical numbers: the better the system, the more it excludes the uninitiated. In Larsson's view the system is splendid indeed. Thus, his proposals, while intriguing, have proved too conjectural to persuade most members of the guild. There is a risk of indulging in undisciplined speculation about substructures that, in this arena in particular, verge on the kabbalistic.

To the contrary, however, I contend that the numbers of the Bible are due for reassessment. In what follows, I examine a few ways of reading Genesis by the numbers. Reasons to do so include the general abandonment of biblical chronology by exegetes and theologians, and the tacit surrender of the field to readers indifferent (who view the numbers as tedious) and ideological (who believe the numbers deliver the exact age of the Earth). To look at parts of a familiar text that many readers today are inclined to skip over is to rise to a challenge that should appeal to any critic. As the poet W.H. Auden puts it in his list of touchstones for critics, the first question he would ask if he could formally test a person's literary judgment is, "Do you like, and by like I really mean like, not approve of on principle: Long lists of proper names such as the Old Testament genealogies or the Catalogue of Ships in the Iliad?"[17] In spite of their reputation, accounts of years and generations in the Bible, especially in Genesis, have regularly shown themselves to be occasions for fascination and even, at times, delight. Furthermore, the numbers of Genesis are far from random. Their true significance may not be obvious, but what is it? This is an important question, worthy of full consideration by biblical scholars and other interested parties. J.P. Fokkelman has called the distributed genealogical tables of Genesis "a notarial act" linked to broader themes of land, blessing, and fertility. The phrase evokes the official, scribal character of the genealogies while also registering their function as instruments that certify the narrative materials in which they appear. Genesis, he writes, "is larded with […] *tōledōt* and genealogies."[18] A full understanding of this book, then, must incorporate an understanding of its numbers. In a few cases at least, one of which will be developed below, there is something new to say – or rather, something old that has been forgotten – that has a stable exegetical basis.

My approach will be qualitative, not quantitative. I do not aim to discover another secret system in Genesis, or to offer results that prove or disprove

17 For the full list, see "Making, Knowing and Judging," in *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays*, W. H. Auden. (New York: Random House, 1962).

18 J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis: Specimens of Stylistic and Structural Analysis*, SSN (Studia Semitica Neerlandica) 17 (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1975), 239.

comprehensive systems posited by others. Rather, by working with two numbers associated with the Joseph Story, I will characterize some issues that accompany the interpretation of Genesis when that interpretation turns on the numbers. A major question in this study is whether the numbers of Genesis add up. Although my first result will be negative – the interval of years discussed in the next section does not add up, in my judgment – I remain open to the possibility that there is a deep coherence to the figures and cyphers that so obviously interest those ancients who worked Genesis into its received forms, in Hebrew and Aramaic and Greek and so on. To begin, let me take an example from one of the most successful readings of Genesis in recent memory.

2 Twenty-Two Years Apart: An Example of Linear Time

In his brilliant and classic account of *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (1981), Robert Alter uses the detail of a twenty-two year timespan to accentuate the drama of Joseph's first encounters with his brothers after they sell him into slavery in Egypt. Alter writes about the reunion of this family under the title "Narration and Knowledge," and his discussion serves as a showcase for many of the narrative techniques he finds at play in the Hebrew Bible.

> The consummate artistry of the story involves an elaborate and inventive use of most of the major techniques of biblical narrative that we have considered in the course of this study: the deployment of thematic key-words; the reiteration of motifs; the subtle definition of character, relations, and motives mainly through dialogue; the exploitation, especially in dialogue, of verbatim repetition with minute but significant changes introduced; the narrator's discriminating shifts from strategic and suggestive withholding of comment to the occasional flaunting of an omniscient overview; the use at points of a montage of sources to catch the multifaceted nature of the fictional subject.[19]

This summary captures Alter's signature method of close reading in the Joseph Story (hereafter, JS), and in general. But in a series of comments on JS's climax, Alter also incorporates an observation about the story's timeframe that could easily be overlooked, and that is not usually remembered as a hallmark of his approach to the Bible.

Reference to a separation of twenty-two years occurs a handful of times in Alter's exposition, at first almost incidentally, starting with the gauging of

19 Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 176.

"a hiatus of silence" between Jacob's initial address to his sons in Genesis 42 and his command in the next verse that they go down to Egypt to buy food.[20] Alter reads between the lines as he begins to characterize the fraught psychological subtext that informs a series of three dialogues between Joseph and his ten older brothers. The brothers say more than they know as they face up to a kidnapping that was fratricide, for all intents and purposes, and that appears to have no moral statute of limitations. Readers must wonder if Joseph contemplates revenge as he works his advantage, since even the ten, who do not yet know the true identity of the viceroy before whom they tremble and bow, are aware of the heavy burden of guilt they bear because of wrongs done to their long-lost brother. That Joseph weeps in each of these three encounters is just one indication of the depth of background in this story.[21] At the climactic moment, Joseph loses control. He sends his attendants from the room but sobs so loudly that even Pharaoh hears of it. Alter writes:

> The rising pattern, then, of three repetitions, begun with the eavesdropping Joseph of Gen 42:24, is not only a formal symmetry through which the writer gives shape and order to his tale, but also the tracing of an emotional process in the hero, from the moment when twenty-two years of anger begin to dissolve to the one when he can bring himself to say "I am Joseph, your brother."[22]

Specificity about time lends poignancy and realism to his description of Joseph's great disclosure. It functions similarly in Alter's characterization of Judah, the fourth-born son, as one who finally reconciles himself to the paternal favoritism that has afflicted this family for decades, and indeed, for generations. In showing how much this leading son of Israel has changed, Judah's speech in Genesis 44 clears the way for Joseph's stirring response in the next chapter:

> Twenty-two years earlier, Judah engineered the selling of Joseph into slavery; now he is prepared to offer himself as a slave so that the other son of Rachel can be set free. Twenty-two years earlier, he stood with his brothers and silently watched when the bloodied tunic they had brought to Jacob sent their father into a fit of anguish; now he is willing to do anything in order not to have to see his father suffer that way again.[23]

For Alter, through the manifold operations of the Bible's literary art, the biblical narrator represents visions of human experience troubled by moral and

20 Alter, *Biblical Narrative*, 160.
21 There are a number of significant tears in Genesis, but Joseph weeps more than any other patriarch. See Gen 42:24; 43:30; 45:2, 14–15; 46:29; 50:1, 17.
22 Alter, *Biblical Narrative*, 168.
23 Alter, *Biblical Narrative*, 175.

psychological division. Such depths are to be found in an array of finely observed textual details, including, among many others, this twenty-two year index. Like all other elliptical data, its particular significance in JS must be inferred, but in a literary approach the number seems to help set a plausible human framework for this drama of personal and familial transformation.

But where exactly does the detail come from? The text of Genesis provides no direct statement of the duration of Joseph's separation from his family. Instead, a loose time-frame is adumbrated by three reports of Joseph's age. Joseph is seventeen years old when the story begins (37:2), thirty when he ascends to Pharaoh's right hand (41:46), and one hundred and ten when he dies (50:22, 26). By correlating these ages to the seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine, as revealed by Joseph's interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams, we can work out a relative chronology for Joseph's life. Since he enters into Pharaoh's service just before the seven years of plenty, and since Joseph's family does not come down to Egypt until the second year of global famine (45:6), Joseph is thirty-nine years old when his dreams are fulfilled. Therefore, Joseph has been separated from his family for a total of twenty-two years.

Whatever this sum amounts to in JS, we should pause to note how imprecise and incidental it is. It is imprecise because Alter applies it equally to the ten oldest brothers from Reuben to Zebulun, to the youngest brother Benjamin, and to the father Jacob, even though each of these parties appear before Joseph at different times (42:6, 43:28–29, 46:29). On this way of reasoning, Joseph's thirty-ninth year includes four trips to and from Egypt by his brothers, in various combinations, plus Simeon's period of captivity in Egypt, which is of uncertain duration but lasts long enough for his family to eat through whatever provisions they bring out of Egypt the first time, plus enough time for Jacob and all sixty-six children and grandchildren of Israel who are not already in Egypt to caravan from Beersheba to Goshen. Even by modern standards that is a lot of ground to cover in one year. Furthermore, the sum is incidental because of the way it must be inferred. The key fact that allows one to calculate twenty-two years is revealed in a speech far removed from any signposts to Joseph's age. When Joseph first announces himself to his brothers, at the culmination of their second visit, they are dumbstruck. Joseph draws them close, repeats his declaration, and adds some exposition.

> Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the

> land of Egypt. Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. I will provide for you there – since there are five more years of famine to come – so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.' And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here." (Genesis 45:4–13 NRSV)

Without this speech, we would simply not be in a position to deduce Joseph's years of separation. Nor is it clear if bygone years concern the protagonist in this scene. Joseph maintains a bit of distance between himself and his older brothers, who are in fact half-brothers, born not to Rachel, like himself and Benjamin, but to Leah, Bilhah, and Zilpah. He distinguishes between "your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin," and speaks of "my father" – not "our" – and of kindness to that father's children and grandchildren, as if mercy prevails merely out of love for the patriarch. Except in the case of Benjamin, there is no rush to embrace (the contrast between verses 14 and 15 is instructive). Joseph provides for the ten, but his gifts to Benjamin and his father are lavish. If years press in on Joseph's mind at this point, they do not come from the past. Five more years of famine threaten the life of all in the land. As with Abraham in Genesis 12, the need for food alone could justify a sojourn in Egypt. But there is an additional reason to hurry, anticipated by the declaration with which this episode begins: "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" (Gen 45:3). The son's terse question – *haʿôḏ ʾāḇi ḥāy* – gets its answer from father Israel himself, when he finally resolves to come down to Egypt: "My son Joseph is still alive [*ʿôḏ-yôseḇ beni ḥāy*]. I will go and see him before I die" (Gen 45:28). Joseph bears witness to the hidden workings of providence in times past, and can disclose secret knowledge about times to come, but like his father at this moment he is animated by what he does not know. All sense of urgency in Genesis 45 comes from doubt about whether time enough remains for the reunion of this beloved son, presumed dead, and the aged father. Fundamentally, it is not the twenty-two lost years, measurable though they be, but the waning years ahead, of limited and uncertain number, that drive both Joseph and Jacob to hurry.

Alter's index might work at a secondary or tertiary level of reading, but it tends to pull him away from the primary senses of the text. In terms of years, Joseph's speech has nothing to say about what an excruciatingly long time has passed since the whole family was all together in Canaan. Joseph is certainly not wistful for that time. Moreover, the five years that *are* named speak to the imminent threat of starvation. The major question facing the family now is one

of survival. To that extent, the past may lurk in the present at this juncture, since God's promise to make Abraham a great nation hangs in the balance once again. However, the scene centers on a display of feelings wholly absorbed in the present moment, whether as fear giving way to stupefaction in the case of the brothers, or, audible especially in Joseph's question and Jacob's answer, as an astonished hope to find the thread of life intact. The length of separation holds no particular significance for the characters at this key moment, or at any other moment, because nobody in the story ever thinks about the passage of time as such.[24] And yet Alter re-deploys the number in his Genesis translation and commentary, calling Jacob's resolution to go see Joseph in 45:28 a "self-defining motif":

> Jacob's story, like David's, is virtually unique in ancient literature in its searching representation of the radical transformations a person undergoes in the slow course of time. The powerful young man who made his way across the Jordan to Mesopotamia with only his walking staff, who wrestled with stones and men and divine beings, is now an old man tottering on the brink of the grave, bearing the deep wounds of his long life.[25]

But Jacob's announcement of his age to Pharaoh in 47:9 is characteristically melancholic, suggesting that he has perhaps not changed much at all since the moment when he first capitulated to grief and self-pity. In the end, the father's early resolution to follow his son down to Sheol in a state of mourning, in Gen 37:35, is substantiated by the story arc. What kind of answer does Pharaoh expect when he asks about Jacob's years? What he hears is this: "The years of my sojourn are one hundred and thirty. Few and wretched have been the years of my life; they do not amount to the years of my father's lives during their sojourns" (Gen 47:9, author's translation). One hundred and thirty years are few *only* in comparison to Abraham and Isaac, who live to one hundred and seventy-five years, and one hundred and eighty years, respectively. Even Moses lives only

24 What do the patriarchs remember? Remarkably, in Genesis only God and Joseph are ever described as remembering anything. God remembers his covenant (Gen 9:15–16) or his people (Noah, Abraham, Rachel). Joseph asks Pharaoh's cupbearer to remember him when he is released from prison (Gen 40:13), but the cupbearer fails to do so (Gen 41:9). Joseph himself, on just one occasion, is said to remember his dreams when he first sees his brothers in Egypt (Gen 42:9). But he thinks of the dreams, not the passage of time. When Israel learns that Joseph is alive (Gen 45:28), he evidently remembers none of God's promises to him, or his father, or his father's father, thinking only to see the son whose death he has mourned continuously. The point is that the flow of time in Genesis, if it is established by an overarching timeline, is extrinsic to the consciousness of its characters.

25 Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), 265.

to one hundred and twenty.[26] In what sense, then, are Jacob's one hundred and thirty years wretched [*rāʿim*]? Alter describes how his life has been marked by struggle, in spite of everything the old man has attained by now:

> He displaces Esau, but only at the price of fear and lingering guilt and long exile. He gets Rachel, but only by having Leah imposed on him, with all the domestic strife that entails, and he loses Rachel early in childbirth. He is given a new name by his divine adversary, but comes away with a permanent wound. He gets the full solar-year number of twelve sons, but there is enmity among them (for which he bears some responsibility), and he spends twenty-two years continually grieving over his favorite son, who he believes is dead. This is, in sum, a story with a happy ending that withholds any simple feeling of happiness at the end.[27]

Can it truly be said that Jacob's affect throughout JS reflects a narrative style grounded in "profound moral realism"? Can a story that ends with the sharp tears, the public wailing, the half-truths or lies, the dread about retribution, and the two elaborate funerals of Genesis 50 be said to have a "happy ending" in any normal sense? There is something in Alter's reading that misses the mark at this point. Does Jacob really change, as a literary character, across the final years of his life? If so, why does he address Pharaoh with a keening voice even after he has been restored to his favorite son? Looking back at the beginning from the end, Jacob's pledge to mourn Joseph all the way to the grave looks perfectly resolute: he wears the guise of grief without exception until he dies.[28] A histrionic tone persists from his first sight of Joseph's bloody tunic until he mounts his deathbed, and for that time at least Jacob remains a comparatively flat, two-dimensional character. He is the father overcome with grief, bound to sorrow and death.

In Alter's case, then, reference to twenty-two years apart involves a doubtful take on the role that time plays in the last section of Genesis. It is not an agent of change, or a marker of character development. This is not to say that measurement of time has no place in JS, or that the narrative lacks psychological depth. The story features several time-denominated numbers, and its pathos can be extraordinary. But Alter's focus on this particular number as a sign of emotional depth displaces the significance of the numbers that actually appear in the

26 See Gen 25:7, 35:28, 50:26 and Deut 31:2, 34:7. Here of course I set aside the primeval ancestors, whose lifespans range anywhere between 969 and 205 years. See further the conclusion, below.

27 Alter, *Five Books*, 273.

28 On this point compare Benno Jacob, *The First Book of the Bible: Genesis*, trans. Ernest Jacob and Walter Jacob (New York: Ktav, 1974), 256, and Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis: Translated and Interpreted*, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1997), 384; trans. of Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis: Übersetzt und Erklärt*, 3rd ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1910), 399.

narrative. The meaning behind these other digits will be nearly as elliptical, and perhaps just as apt to be misconstrued, although it seems likely that their sense will be more schematic than what one would expect to find in oblique markers of moral and psychological realism. Biblical narrative is rightly said to be "fraught with background," to use Erich Auerbach's phrase,[29] but in a consideration of the lifespans of the patriarchs, the critical question is still how to interpret that background.

3 The Problem of Twenty-Two Years

From another viewpoint, the span of twenty-two years in Joseph's life looks like the thin end of a wedge. In his *Theological-Political Treatise* (1670), Benedict de Spinoza decides that Ezra compiled the Pentateuch, and some other biblical books, but "without examining them properly and setting them in due order."[30] To show the composite nature of the Bible in general, he cites a number of verbatim parallels across its historical narratives. He then selects Genesis 38 for special consideration, noting how it begins with the words "at that time." At what time? For Spinoza, it cannot be the time of its immediate literary context, which is the beginning of JS, because the twenty-two years that Joseph spends alone in Egypt do not allow for the developments that must take place in Judah's life before the larger family is reunited.

> For from the time when Joseph was taken into Egypt until the time when the patriarch Jacob also set out for Egypt with all his family, we can calculate no more than twenty-two years [….] Yet no one can imagine that in this short period so many things could have happened. For Judah begat three children, one after the other, from one wife whom he married at that time; the eldest of them grew up and took Tamar to wife; when he died, the second brother married her; he too died; and long after these events, Judah himself unwittingly had intercourse with his own daughter-in-law, Tamar, who bore him twin sons, one of whom became a parent – and all within the aforesaid period of twenty-two years![31]

The chronological problems only get worse when the timeline is extended to Jacob and the rest of the family. Spinoza works backward from Gen 47:9, where

29 Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 12, 15. See Alter, *Biblical Narrative*, 17 for a sense of why this judgment "is at once resoundingly right and too sweepingly general."
30 Benedict de Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, trans. Michael Silverthorne and Jonathan Israel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 130.
31 Spinoza, *Treatise*, 131–32.

Jacob declares his age as one hundred and thirty, to show that he must have married Leah at the age of eighty-four. (To arrive at this result he subtracts the following from 130: Joseph's twenty-two years in Egypt, his seventeen years in his father's household, and the seven years that Jacob labored for Rachel.) If this is correct, Jacob's advanced age produces a host of incongruities for his other children. Dinah, for example, "was scarcely seven years old when she was raped by Shechem, and Simeon and Levi were scarcely twelve and eleven respectively when they sacked his whole city and put all its citizens to the sword."[32] In this way Spinoza argues that the Pentateuch "is narrated in a confused manner, without order and without respect for chronology."[33]

Spinoza is far from the first person to calculate Joseph's twenty-two years apart. The Talmud does the math, too, in support of a parenetic point that one should wait up to twenty-two years for the fulfillment of a dream (b. Ber. 55b). There even seems to be a recognition, at some level, that the numbers of Genesis pose a problem. Working forward from the years of Jacob by using figures given in Gen 16:16, 21:5, 25:17, and 25:26, the Babylonian tractate Megillah notes that Jacob only seems to be one hundred and sixteen years old when he stands before Pharaoh, which is fourteen years fewer than what he reports (b. Meg. 17a). Why do the sums differ? This traditional solution places Jacob in the Yeshivah of Shem and Eber, where he is supposed to have studied Torah for fourteen years immediately after his flight from Esau and before his arrival in Laban's house. "Rabbah said in the name of R. Isaac b. Samuel b. Martha: The study of the Torah is superior to the honouring of father and mother. For, the fourteen years that Jacob spent in the house of Eber, he was not punished" (b. Meg. 16b).[34] According to legend, Shem, son of Noah, and his great grandson, Eber, founded a school that was attended by some of the younger patriarchs. From the chronology of Genesis 11 one can infer that Shem lived long enough to see Isaac marry Rebekah, but not quite long enough to herald the birth of Jacob and Esau. Eber's years overlap with those of the twins, however, and so in theory he could have taken on Jacob as a student. Rabbinic tradition suggests that Jacob was subject to divine punishment for the years in which he had abandoned his parents by living in exile, but that he received an exemption for those years away which were spent in a *beit midrash*.

32 Spinoza, *Treatise*, 132. The fact that this short chapter would receive more annotation than any other suggests that the author's chronology met resistance. In one such note Spinoza argues against the view, held by Ibn Ezra among others, that Jacob took several years to return to Bethel, and he adds that Benjamin must have been a grandfather by the age of twenty-four (265).

33 Spinoza, *Treatise*, 132.

34 Translation: Isidore Epstein, ed. *The Babylonian Talmud, Seder Mo'ed* (London: Soncino, 1938), 101.

That God did not hold this time against him is derived from a clever analysis of chronology, as shown in b. Meg. 17a:

> Why are the years of Ishmael mentioned? So as to reckon them by the years of Jacob [….] Sixty-three and fourteen till Joseph was born make seventy-seven, and it is written, *And Joseph was thirty years old when he stood before Pharaoh*. This makes a hundred and seven. Add seven years of plenty and two of famine, and we have a hundred and sixteen, and it is written, *And Pharaoh said unto Jacob, How many are the days of the years of thy life? And Jacob said unto Pharaoh, The days of the years of my sojournings are a hundred and thirty years*. But [we have just seen that] they were only a hundred and sixteen? We must conclude therefore that he spent fourteen years in the house of Eber, as it has been taught: "After Jacob our father had left for Aram Naharaim two years, Eber died." He then went forth from where he was and came to Aram Naharaim. From this it follows that when he stood by the well he was seventy-seven years old. And how do we know that he was not punished [for these fourteen years]? As it has been taught: "We find that Joseph was away from his father twenty-two years, just as Jacob our father was absent from his father." But Jacob's absence was thirty-six years? It must be then that the fourteen years which he was in the house of Eber are not reckoned. But when all is said and done, the time he spent in the house of Laban was only twenty years? – The fact is that [he was also punished] because he spent two years on the way, as it has been taught: He left Aram Naharaim and came to Succoth and spent there eighteen months, as it says, *And Jacob journeyed to Succoth, and built him a house, and made booths for cattle*; and in Bethel he spent six months and brought there sacrifices.[35]

This interpretation achieves several things, three of which are of interest at present. First, it mitigates some of the difficulties that arise when the numbers of Genesis are read as a linear chronological system. Like Spinoza, it finds too few years in the total narration of Jacob's and Joseph's lives. However, instead of concluding that the system itself is incoherent, it exploits a gap in the data to create a fourteen-year buffer.[36] Second, it provides a rationale for Jacob's grief in being deprived of Joseph. Since he had broken the Fifth Commandment in his youth, it only seems right that he should suffer an equivalent loss of filial honor in old age. As Rashi and a number of commentators after him would say, the years of separation from his beloved son were a matter of justice: "measure for measure" [מדה כנגד מדה].[37] Parallel time in exile illustrates how the sins of the father may be visited on the next generation, too. Finally, the interpretation finds an exact mirror in Jacob's lifespan to Joseph's twenty-two years apart, thereby

35 Translation: Epstein, *Seder Mo'ed*, 101–2.

36 Since it starts from the beginning of Jacob's life, though, the Talmud does not resolve the compression that Spinoza finds by counting back from the end of Jacob's life.

37 See Rashi on Gen 28:9 (cf. 37:34). A convenient bilingual edition is available online in the Sefaria Library, https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi_on_Genesis.

binding father and son together numerologically. This last feat takes some doing. Genesis is clear that Jacob worked for Laban for just twenty years, so Jacob must be held liable for two additional years of travel. But the result is most impressive. An apparent deficit of fourteen years near the end of Jacob's life is accounted for as a hidden surplus in an earlier time, where it does two things at once, first lifting up the patriarch as a devout student of Torah, and then measuring his guilt in the violation of one of its most basic precepts. It would seem that Joseph *must* spend twenty-two years away from his father, because Jacob had neglected his duty to his own parents for twenty-two years.

If Spinoza knows of this tradition, he rejects it in favor of a deconstruction of Genesis by the numbers. In time – Julius Wellhausen's *Prolegomena* (1883, English translation [ET] 1885) was still over 200 years away – Spinoza's approach would acquire the look of inevitability. At first it provoked a backlash. Division of Genesis into two sources in *Conjectures sur les Mémoires originaux* (1753) allows Jean Astruc to alleviate some chronological difficulties, such as whether Abraham lived to see Isaac marry and have twin sons.[38] With the exception of Gen 38–39 and 49:1–28, however, which he assigns to his Document B based on the use of the Divine Name, Astruc leaves JS untouched. For him the bulk of the narrative, including its entire chronological profile, belongs to Document A.[39] Karl David Ilgen proposes a far more complicated theory in *Die Urkunden des ersten Buchs von Moses in ihrer Urgestalt* (1798), positing that Genesis had been compiled by a redactor ("Sammler") who worked with seventeen sources written by three distinct authors.[40] Stories of Jacob in his source No. 15, by "Sopher Eliel harischon," contain the reports of Joseph's and Jacob's ages (Gen 37:2, 41:46, 50:22; 47:9, 28). Stories of Jacob

38 See John W. Rogerson, "Early Old Testament Critics in the Roman Catholic Church – Focussing on the Pentateuch," in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation. Volume II: From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment*, ed. Magne Sæbø (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 847.

39 Jean Astruc, *Conjectures sur les Mémoires originaux dont il paroit que Moyse s'est servi pour composer le Livre de la Genèse, avec des Remarques qui appuient ou qui éclaircissent ces Conjectures* (Bruxelles: Fricx, 1753), 319. Against Spinoza he argues that Moses himself composed Genesis by working with sources. Perhaps the greatest advantage of his proposal, as he sees it, is the elimination of anachronisms in the final text (371, cf. 21). See 424–426 for an apologetic solution to the embarrassment of Benjamin's age. However, on the question of whether Isaac was still alive when Joseph was sold into slavery, Astruc can speak of "un dérangement manifeste dans l'ordre de la chronologie" (408).

40 Karl David Ilgen, *Die Urkunden des ersten Buchs von Moses in ihrer Urgestalt: zum bessern Verständniß und richtigern Gebrauch derselben in ihrer gegenwärtigen Form* (Halle: Hemmerde & Schwetschke, 1798).

and Joseph in source No. 16, by "Sopher Eliel haschschenei," contain Joseph's plea to hurry down to Egypt because five more years of famine remain (Gen 45:6, 11).[41] Within this framework it is no longer meaningful to work out how long Joseph was separated from his family. The proverbial knot had been cut. Ilgen's specific proposal would not prevail, but by the time of Hermann Gunkel's landmark Genesis commentary (1901), it was a natural instinct for a leading biblical scholar to relegate the Priestly material in JS, including all reports of ages, to the very back of the book, so that he could instead prioritize a microscopic analysis of Yahwist (J) and Elohist (E) sources, including Joseph's disclosure of himself to his brothers. Within a robust source-critical paradigm, Astruc's sparring with Spinoza over obscure points of chronology would become irrelevant.

It would take a further lifetime – a full eighty years – before conditions were ripe for Alter's bold reintegration of Gen 38 with its literary context in JS. In so doing, Alter appears to turn back the clock on Astruc, who first dislocated that text. Gerhard von Rad's final verdict (ET in 1972) is categorical: "Every attentive reader can see that the story of Judah and Tamar has no connection at all with the strictly organized Joseph story at whose beginning it is now inserted."[42] As if in answer, Alter deftly shows how a reader who attends to catchwords and parallel situations can recognize (*haker-na!*) a network of significant, well-wrought literary connections between Gen 37 and 38. He does this by starting, like nearly all ancient readers of the Bible, with an "assumption of interconnectedness."[43] Then again, since he acknowledges the Bible's composite nature, he also hopes to surpass the entire source-critical tradition. Unlike the ancients, he does not assume that the Bible is perfectly unified. Rather, he argues that the Judah and Tamar story, in its present position, stems from a "careful *splicing of sources* by a brilliant literary artist."[44] In all this he is widely viewed as having succeeded. But Alter takes the assumption of interconnectedness a step further by reasserting a coherent chronology for JS within Genesis, even though the oldest and strongest argument against the coherence of Gen 38 is the shortage of time available for the events it describes as occurring "at that time." Spinoza's logic on that point is devastating. With his acknowledgment of sources, Alter could have remained aloof to the numbers. In fact he translates *vayehi ba'et hahi'* as "at *about* that

41 Ilgen, *Urkunden*, 240, 251, 264, 299.

42 Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. John H. Marks, OTL (Old Testament Library) (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 356.

43 Alter, *Biblical Narrative*, 11.

44 Alter, *Biblical Narrative*, 10 (emphasis added).

time," which almost looks like a nod to the problem.[45] As we have seen, though, he is more than incidentally committed to a twenty-two year index of time in JS, which he construes as a marker of psychological depth, and which can only be derived from a strictly sequential reading of the numbers. It is much easier to put Gen 38 back in its place, canonically speaking, than it is to put it back in its time. Literary art is one thing, but the logic chopping problems of linear biblical chronology abide.

4 Twice Seventeen Years Together: An Example of Figural Symmetry

Can one get back behind both Astruc and Spinoza? Biblical scholars have learned to attend to the art of biblical narrative. Is there also an art of biblical numbers? If so, could its rediscovery lead to a better understanding of the contours of the biblical text, and its complex meanings, as well as its reception history prior to the Enlightenment? My provisional answer to these questions is yes. The Talmud Bavli, quoted above, points to a way of understanding the numbers that is all but forgotten. Its sense of *linear time* is still very much with us. Witness the mathematical-exegetical exercises of, among many others, Ussher, Spinoza, Astruc, Newton, Colenso, and, more recently, Larsson, Alter, Hendel, Pierce, and Park. What has dropped out of discussion is its embrace of *figural time*. Let me offer a working definition. Figural time is non-linear, repetitive, and isotropic, meaning that it acts equally in all directions. It is patterned in such a way that it can double up, creating layers or folds across time. One needs to make room for a category like this adequately to describe the doubling of the seventeen years that Jacob and Joseph live together, because nearly all modern approaches to the years in Genesis are firmly anisotropic, meaning that they are polarized along linear frameworks. Since Spinoza, the numbers have almost universally been flattened into chronologies and timelines. They have become mere vectors. A notion of symmetrically folded time, as an aspect of figural time, is needed to follow Genesis in its pre-modern reception, too. The point of doing the math in b. Meg. 17a is not to produce the number twenty-two as an independent result, but rather to use that number to enhance Jacob's connection with his son Joseph. As a bonus, it makes Jacob a student of Torah for fourteen years as well. While the discovery of hidden links to later Jewish institutions stretches the plain sense of Genesis to its limits,

45 Alter, *Biblical Narrative*, 5 (emphasis added).

the insight that puts the years of Jacob and Joseph in parallel stands closer to the world of the text. After all, Gen 37:2 introduces JS with a note that could not be more explicit about the centrality of Joseph, and his years, to the generations of his father, the eponymous Israel.

Unfortunately, Joseph's twenty-two year period of separation, even when set alongside some of Jacob's years of exile, is not a stable figure. It is simply not clear if it coheres with the meaning of JS, even by extension. However, the exegete is on firmer footing with the explicitly doubled periods of seventeen years together. Joseph spends the first seventeen years of his life with his father, while Jacob spends the last seventeen years of his life with his long-lost son. Moreover, they both appear before Pharaoh at comparable ages, namely, at thirty or one hundred and thirty. What does such clear numerical symmetry mean? To the homiletical mind, it might well recall the principle of measure for measure, or the full scope of the Fifth Commandment.[46] For a variety of reasons, however, modern commentators are mute about these parallels. For some, like Gunkel and von Rad, the silence is related to a decision to excise P from an otherwise excellent story. For others, it may have to do with the dominance of linear time as such, which is characteristic of the historical-critical era, its rise, and its aftermath. A survey of major Genesis commentaries since 1850 turns up only a minor exception to the rule. Franz Delitzsch (in 1852–72, ET 1888–89) was one of the last to dwell on the problem that twenty-two years makes for the narratives of Judah and Benjamin.[47] Beyond that set of issues, however, the number has no positive value for him. August Dillmann (1875, ET 1897) and S.R. Driver (1904) are typical of those who read Gen 41:46 as pointing to the duration of Joseph's hardest trials.[48] He is thirteen years a slave. Like Driver and others, William Henry Bennett (1904) and John Skinner (1910) find that the Priestly chronology does nothing so much as disturb the timeline of J and E.[49] Later, E.A. Speiser (1964) and Robert Davidson (1979) simply rehearse

46 See Gerald J. Blidstein, *Honor Thy Father and Mother: Filial Responsibility in Jewish Law and Ethics* (New York: Ktav, 1975), 61–62.

47 Franz Delitzsch, *A New Commentary on Genesis*, trans. Sophia Taylor, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1889), 265–67, 276, 304, 309, 346–47.

48 August Dillmann, *Genesis, Critically and Exegetically Expounded*, trans. William B. Stevenson, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1897), 377; S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis: With Introduction and Notes* (London: Methuen, 1904), 345.

49 William Henry Bennett, *Genesis: Introduction, Revised Version with Notes, Giving an Analysis Showing from Which of the Original Documents Each Portion of the Text is Taken*, NCB (New Century Bible) 1 (Edinburgh: T.C. & E.C. Jack, 1904), 360; John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*, ICC (International Critical Commentary) (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910), 471.

points about duration and disruption that were, by then, standard.[50] Claus Westermann (1982, ET 1986), who in general is quite brilliant on JS, breaks no new ground here.[51] Umberto Cassuto (1944–49, ET 1961–64) stands out from the pack, thanks to his unusual theory that the numbers of early Genesis reflect a Sumerian sexagesimal system (base 60).[52] However, his commentary only gets as far as Abraham, and it is not obvious that a non-decimal system of numeration would make any difference to the fact that Jacob and Joseph have pairs of years in common. Only Benno Jacob (1934, ET 1974) notes, in passing, that "the father lives exactly as many years with the son in Egypt as the son had lived in the house of the Father in Canaan."[53] Still, he makes little of the point, and he does not connect their parallel appearances before Pharaoh at thirty and one hundred and thirty years of age.[54] With the limited exception of B. Jacob, Genesis commentators in the modern period do not even seem to notice that Joseph's years at seventeen and thirty link him to his father at one hundred and thirty, plus a final seventeen.[55]

The situation is different in traditional interpretation. It is not surprising to find works of Kabbalah taking maximum advantage of the number seventeen (see the *Zohar* on Gen 37:2, under Parashat Vayeshev). In classic Rabbinic literature, too, though, the numerical link between Jacob and Joseph is well established. The Midrash is representative of an instinct that develops a wide range of parallels between this father and this son (see Gen. Rab. 84:5–8). Some will strike modern readers as fanciful. Jacob is said to have taught Joseph all that he learned from Shem and Eber. The two are also said to have been born circumcised, and to look identical. Other parallels have quite a firm basis in

50 E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, AB (Anchor Bible) 1 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), 314; Robert Davidson, *Genesis 12–50*, CBC (Cambridge Bible Commentary) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 248, 274, 292.

51 Claus Westermann, *Genesis 37–50: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986). Despite a recognition of "doubling as an artistic device" (246), age numbers are not considered to reflect the technique. The implicit rationale for their exclusion is source-critical (36, 96, 170–71). See also Claus Westermann, *Joseph: Eleven Bible Studies on Genesis*, trans. Omar Kaste (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).

52 Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, trans. Israel Abrahams, 2 vols. (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1961–1964).

53 Jacob, *First Book*, 319. For father and son alike, he adds, "it is a repetition which compensates for their suffering." How this compensation works is not entirely clear, but it seems to keep within the bounds of linear logic.

54 Jacob, *First Book*, 278, 315.

55 Thanks are due to my research assistant, Jordan Draper, for helping me prowl through the available commentaries. Together we spent over 70 hours in the search. I would be grateful to know if we have overlooked any exceptions.

scripture. They are favorite sons. They strive with their brothers. They live in exile. They become rich. They move down to Egypt. They die in Egypt. They are embalmed. They are carried out of Egypt and interred back in the land of their fathers.[56] And, not to put too fine a point on it, they provide for one another for reciprocal periods of seventeen years. Why else would the Torah go to the trouble of telling us explicitly that Jacob lived in Egypt for seventeen years, a time span we can easily work out for ourselves, if not to draw attention to the opening of the Joseph Story? Following the thirteenth and final use of the word *toledot* in Genesis, here with the name of Jacob, the age of Joseph is in fact the very first thing we are told:

> Now Jacob settled in the land of his father's sojournings, in the land of Canaan. These are the generations of Jacob: Joseph, at the age of seventeen, was shepherding the flocks together with his brothers. He was a youth amongst the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives, but Joseph brought a wicked report of them to their father. (Gen 37:1–2, author's translation)

This introduction finds a clear parallel in Gen 47:27–28, which states that "Israel settled [*wayyešeḇ yiśrāʾel*] in the land of Egypt." The language there answers the initial notice that "Jacob settled [*wayyešeḇ yaʿaqōḇ*] […] in the land of Canaan." In Goshen, though, Jacob's family does not merely sojourn. It acquires holdings [*wayyeʾoḥazû*] reminiscent of the territory that Esau's family had acquired in

56 Jacob's "down to Sheol" motif (Gen 37:35; 42:38; 44:29, 31) culminates in two things: his own answer to his son's call to come down to Egypt (Gen 45:9), and God's reassurance to Jacob that God will in fact go down with him and then personally bring him back up (Gen 46:3–4). Jacob refuses to be comforted in Gen 37:35, saying that he "will go down to [his] son" (the sense of כי in אל־בני כי־ארד is probably syndetic [Joüon §157c, GKC §157b], or perhaps emphatic [DCH 4:388], but not adversative). Joseph will in time insist that his father come down to him directly (אל־תעמד אלי רדה), and Jacob's decision to go to Joseph plays on an established set of associations between pits and Egypt and the grave. Jacob may be reluctant to go down to Egypt. Whereas Abraham travels down to Egypt with ease in Gen 12, JS reflects something of the prohibition against Isaac making that trip during another famine (Gen 26:2, cf. Deut 17:16). Still, Jacob's life is so closely bound up with Joseph's that father and son become mirrors to one another in death, real and apparent. It is significant that Joseph does not go up to collect his father. Joseph escapes death in the land, and in the logic of the story it seems Jacob must follow to see the life that his son preserves outside the land. After their actual deaths, both are embalmed (Gen 50:2, 26) – a procedure unique in the entire Bible, and prohibited by later Jewish law, but necessary here because it enables their descendants to carry them up out of Egypt ceremoniously (cf. Exod 13:19). In short, given the singular bond between the father whose "generations" are identified with this son above all others (Gen 37:2), and the broad narrative movement toward life through death, Joseph's descent into Egypt virtually requires Jacob to follow.

Edom (see the use of "holdings" [*ʾaḥuzzâ*] in Gen 36:40–43).[57] Finally, the note supplies an update on Jacob's years: "Jacob lived in the land of Egypt for seventeen years. Thus Jacob's total lifespan came to one hundred and forty seven years" (Gen 47:28). These numbers mark the end of Jacob's life, of course, but that cannot be all they mean. The Midrash is not wrong when it describes Joseph as uniquely bound to his father in this respect. It is not merely that Joseph's life recapitulates Jacob's – though Gen 37–50 does reinforce the home key of Gen 12–36 by modulating to a tonic key, if these narratives may be compared to the movements of a sonata. The shared number seventeen points to a deeper level of involvement with Joseph in Jacob, and Jacob in Joseph. In sum, the number shows them to be *figures*, in more than mathematical terms. This figural dimension of the biblical text – and it is there in the text – was fairly obvious to traditional readers, even though it evaporates quickly when exposed to the heat of linear historical logic.

Priestly markers in Gen 37:1–2, including the *toledot* clause, the number seventeen, and a supposed need to restrict guilt for impending crimes to subordinate tribes, prove sufficient for Gunkel to simply eliminate it from his discussion of the Joseph saga. In his view, "P had no interest in Joseph's adventures in Egypt and no ear for the tender, touching tone which resounds in these narratives."[58] Sweeping judgments like these are no longer tenable, not least because of Alter's work. In the case at hand, the double use of seventeen reinforces the most noticeable artistic technique of the Joseph Story, which is its multiplication of doublets. Joseph has three pairs of dreams, and on two occasions he rises to second in command. There also is a pair of incriminating tunics, presented so that Jacob and Potiphar draw the wrong conclusions about Joseph. The two sons of Rachel receive garments of restoration, too, in that Joseph, who changes clothes five times in JS, presents Benjamin with five changes of clothing (Gen 45:22). These brothers are also linked in their descent, since the caravan of Ishmaelites that carries Joseph down to Egypt is laden with the very same goods of gum, balm, and resin that Jacob sends down as a placating gift, once he finally agrees to let Benjamin go (Gen 37:25, 43:11). And finally, like his father, Joseph begets two

57 The relationship to the promised land in Genesis is complex. Joseph, for his part, is born outside of Canaan, in Haran, but his birth is part of the occasion for his family's return to the land (Gen 30:24–25). It is not really clear how much time passes between Joseph's birth and his procession toward Esau, at the back of the line with Rachel (Gen 33:2), or the whole family's safe arrival in the Canaanite city of Shechem (Gen 33:19), where Jacob buys some land and builds an altar. All the same, it is significant that biblical tradition associates Joseph with Shechem so strongly that his final burial there (Josh 24:32) hearkens back to his first arrival in the land of his fathers. Joseph is also sent to Shechem in Gen 37, in search of his brothers, where he stops briefly before following them to Dothan.

58 Gunkel, *Genesis: Translated*, 466; *Genesis: Übersetzt*, 492.

beloved sons who are elevated in Israel's family, but whose positions are nevertheless reversed. In short, if the double set of seventeen years together is secondary, because Priestly, it still harmonizes remarkably well with other numbers and patterns of repetition in the story. Two times seven years, first of plenty, then of famine, is an instrument of preservation for Israel, and through it the world. Two times seventeen years, first in Joseph's youth, then in Jacob's infirmity, echoes the theme of providential care through apparent deprivation. Seen in this light, the so-called Priestly numbers look very much like they belong to the Joseph Story.

5 Questions in Genesis

Do the numbers of years in Genesis add up, then? It depends on the kind of math one is prepared to do. As Spinoza correctly saw in 1670, the span of Joseph's twenty-two years of separation does not add up because it derives from a calculated timeline that does not stand up to scrutiny. Source-critical analysis since Ilgen (1798) indicates that the interval arises merely as an accident of the way the Joseph Story has been put together. That particular number must be abandoned even if the problem it raises does not convert all critical readers of the Pentateuch into source critics. Alter's reintroduction of it in 1981 is unfortunate. It should serve as a reminder of the limits of realism as a hermeneutical framework, for if there is one thing that the numbers of Genesis are not, it is realistic.[59] Hendel, too, building on Alter, oversteps when he characterizes biblical chronology as a leading cause of the end of figuralism. There is a degree of truth in the claim, but it may be more accurate to say that the end of figural reading leads to the demise of biblical chronology. He asserts that the biblical writings were born in realism, lost to figuralism, and only lately recovered by realistic narrative poetics.[60] The story suffers from an inherent implausibility. In their perceptions of reality, can the biblical authors be so radically unlike all the other pre-moderns who receive their work, and so remarkably like us? No, that is most unlikely – but this is a negative conclusion.

Spinoza and those who follow are unable to state positively what the biblical numbers might signify, relative to the terms on which they are actually presented. Why is this so? As a hypothesis, I suggest that the failure, which involves virtually everyone in the modern period, relates to the demise of figural reading. The

59 Can any round age in excess of one hundred years properly be said to be realistic? Even in a biblical framework, as per Psalm 90, the conventional limit would seem to be seventy or eighty.
60 Hendel, *Book of Genesis*.

assumption that time-denominated numbers in Genesis reduce to linear time – that their total represents an absolute chronological system, or set of systems, as the case may be – has been pervasive. It has gone unexamined for too long. As we have seen, it can mislead even the most skillful readers. And, as I have argued in the case of JS and its pre-modern reception, the numbers have another important dimension. The framework of twice seventeen years together, at the beginning of Joseph's life and the end of Jacob's, and the symmetry of their appearances before Pharaoh at thirty and one hundred and thirty years of age, respectively, and all the additional parallel associations between Jacob and Joseph that these numbers evidently help confirm for ancient readers of Genesis, as in the Midrash – all of this suffers acute neglect in and after the Enlightenment. The neglect constitutes a blind spot that modern readers have when thinking about how time operates in this ancient text. Modern time is overwhelmingly linear, but biblical time seems able to move in multiple directions. The biblical scholar's task here is therefore not just a matter of reconstructing timelines. The available methods of historical criticism have been singularly ill-equipped to do the math that a text like JS requires, because when the numbers cease to be figures, figural time disappears. When the numbers are allowed to stand as figures, however, and so to register an added dimension that many ancient readers perceive by instinct, then a different kind of genealogical coherence begins to emerge. With Auden one might even wish to call it poetic.

My conclusions thus far are necessarily limited, but the thesis has broad implications. If having some grasp on figural time is necessary for reading Genesis by the numbers, as I find in the Joseph Story, several major hermeneutical questions follow. In literary-critical terms, are there instances of this neglected category elsewhere in Genesis, or is it limited to JS in a way that would reinforce standard accounts of its independence due to a unique narrative style and compositional history? At a time when biblical scholars are reevaluating some of the most basic aspects of pentateuchal criticism, developing an answer to this question could be useful.[61] Conversely, an expansive synchronic study of the genealogies of Genesis has gone some distance towards reintegrating the book's *toledot* framework with its narrative threads, although the author's approach to reader response is

61 Key works in the current debate include Joel S. Baden, *The Composition of the Pentateuch: Renewing the Documentary Hypothesis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), and Joshua A. Berman, *Inconsistency in the Torah: Ancient Literary Convention and the Limits of Source Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). In JS in particular, Matthew C. Genung, *The Composition of Genesis 37: Incoherence and Meaning in the Exposition of the Joseph Story*, FAT (Forschungen zum Alten Testament) II/95 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017) shows how source-critical questions have returned with a vengeance.

theoretical rather than historical.[62] It stops short of considering figural aspects of biblical generation, which are manifold. Is there good reason not to bring typology or even allegory to the study of Genesis as an intertextual arena, especially if it is described as a field of play? The present calls for a "return to allegory" meet with resistance, understandably enough, but once biblical numbers are seen to act as figures in text and tradition alike, it becomes impossible to insist that allegory be kept at bay. Whether or not it is recovered as a hermeneutical practice, biblical scholars must learn to account for it better just as a matter of historical competence.

Figuralism is integral to the formation and early use of Genesis, and arguably of the rest of the Bible as well. How can biblical and theological scholarship incorporate that recognition into its various tasks? Even at the relatively low-flying level of textual criticism, one feels a need to revisit the classic problem of textual variants in the Genesis genealogies. As is well known, the Masoretic Text, Samaritan Pentateuch, and Septuagint differ systematically on the years of the patriarchs. In fact, the other versions agree with the Masoretic Text that Joseph is seventeen when he is sent out by his father and thirty when he appears before Pharaoh (Gen 37:2, 41:46), and that Jacob is allotted seventeen years in Egypt after his son presents him to Pharaoh at one hundred and thirty years of age (Gen 47:9, 28). In the generations from Adam to Terah, however, the versions present a full array of numerical variants. Do the discrepancies appear in new light if they are considered to have a figural aspect? The reigning theory suggests that adjustments were made to delay the events of the flood and Abram's birth, which seem to have impinged on the long lifespans of the patriarchs.[63] Do any other motives emerge if it turns out that the genealogies are not mere chronological timelines? Are the rival traditions able to coexist easily in the minds of ancient readers who know about them, or does their development simply contribute to

62 Thomas Hieke, *Die Genealogien der Genesis*, HBS (Herders Biblische Studien) 39 (Freiburg: Herder, 2003). The work is thorough and often illuminating, but its bias to a theoretical reader's response is limiting, and not offset by a brief excursus on the post-biblical continuation of the genealogical "system" (270–77). In JS the system merely shows that Israel becomes a people by the start of Exodus, according to Hieke, which explains why the *toledot* framework recedes at that point (211–13).

63 Emanuel Tov, "The Genealogical Lists in Genesis 5 and 11 in Three Different Versions," in *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible, Qumran, Septuagint: Collected Essays, Volume 3*, VTSup (Supplements to Vetus Testamentum) 167 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 221–38. As Tov recognizes, that explanation has limits: "In earlier research it has been suggested that the main reason for the changes is that the three texts revised an earlier text in which several patriarchs survived the flood. This explanation is contradicted by the evidence of the LXX for Methuselah [who outlives the flood by fourteen years], but a better theory has not yet been put forth" (229).

the triumph of chronology over any other aspects of time in Genesis 5 and 11 and beyond? The Republic of Letters troubled over questions of an absolute timeline in a certain way in the seventeenth century. Other responses to the variant ages can be imagined. Indeed, some that are now quite hard to imagine are well represented by older interpretive traditions. One wants a more complete explanation of these curious textual and historical features. In theological terms, too, is the figural dimension of time found in JS just a literary trope, or does it point to some deeper, ontological fact of life? Ephraim Radner's description of Christian figural reading suggests that something deeper is at stake.[64] It would be worth knowing if this is the case, although work in the theology and philosophy of time brings its own set of challenges.

Finally, can the nascent questions outlined here be brought into dialogue? It is not clear how much any one framework admits another, given the way source criticism has worked against figural perception, especially where P is concerned, and given the fact that the ancient rabbis got along just fine before Spinoza and Astruc came along. Methodological problems like these must be set aside for now. It remains only to sound a note of caution for those who would emend the numbers of Genesis based on current judgments about chronological incoherence.[65] It is not yet clear if scholars understand the native meanings of the years of the patriarchs. What we can say with confidence, within the narrow scope of the present study, is that Spinoza and others offer a convincing rebuttal to the old idea that twenty-two years apart has special meaning in the Joseph Story, either as a figural bond or an emotional index, but that the doubling of Joseph's and Jacob's seventeen years together should remind all of us of just how much we stand to learn from a sympathetic reading of early biblical interpretation.

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64 Ephraim Radner, *Time and the Word: Figural Reading of the Christian Scriptures* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).

65 Philippe Guillaume, *Land and Calendar: The Priestly Document from Genesis 1 to Joshua 18*, LHBOTS (Library of Hebrew Bible Old Testament Studies) 391 (London: T&T Clark, 2009) is willing to do this, for example.

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