

Jacob and Joseph (Genesis 37)

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May 23, 2018

Where is the divinity in this story? Now there is a more distant mechanism, something called divine providence. Notice that Joseph has dreams whereas Jacob has “visions at night” (46.2). Joseph is the younger brother, but not the youngest, since there is Benjamin, son of Rachel like him.

37.1

וַיָּשָׁב יַעֲקֹב בְּאֶרֶץ מִגְוָרֵי אָבִיו בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן *And Jacob resided in the land of his fathers' sojournings, in the land of Canaan.* The story restarts, right after the long genealogy of chapter 36. Rashi tells a wonderful parable or *mashal* (from *Tanuma A*, וַיָּשָׁב) regarding the curious structure of genealogies in Genesis, namely that one has ten generations that go quickly by without any detail, then a lengthening story with Noah, followed again by ten generations, and again considerable detail for Abraham:

Why indeed these long lava flows of uninterrupted “and he begat...”? What is the pearl? Isn't it to underline that human life at its best is not a genealogical story with a sort of built-in entropy, but an election, a promise, with difficult and unexpected accomplishments. Nothing, or very little, in the stories of Noah, Abraham, and Jacob, goes according to genealogical line. And what is acquired seems often irremediably lost, only to be miraculously recovered.

The vocabulary used by the author to speak of his putative ancestor's land is curious: Jacob is a resident, like Elijah the Tishbite of 1 Kgs 18-19, and his immediate ancestors were the equivalent of resident aliens μέτοικοι. This land is known to be that of Canaan, as one knows it from late Bronze Age Egyptian texts. But does this way of considering one's relationship

to the mountain massif of Israel-Judah refer to a souvenir of an historical reality at the end of the 2d millennium BCE, or is it a re-investment into this past, and a new understanding, of a 6th c. BCE post-exilic view of history? In this latter view, spelled most clearly in Ezekiel, some of the descendants of Jacob have indeed the most tenuous attachment to their country of origin. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, according to this position, are exemplary settlers or returnees from the East to a land which can be inherited only if the relationship with God and fellow human beings has a certain quality.¹

37.2

והוא נער את-בני בלהה ואת-בני זלפה נשי אביו ויבא יוסף את-דבתם רעה אל-אביהם: *And he was a young man with the sons of Bilhah and with the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives; and he would report their bad doings to their father.* He is telling on his brothers, or rather on a particular set of his brothers, “the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah,” who are the sons of slave women, hence not well positioned to inherit. What is their reputation? Do they go stealing from their “father” (such as sacrificing a goat here and there?). Or when they are “out in the field,” leading the flocks, do they go brutalizing people (women?) around? Are they very different from the Schechem, son of Hamor, of chapter 34, just before? They are the sons of slave women: do they expect to be pushed aside by the other brothers, especially by Rachel’s sons, since Rachel is the favored wife? They are in the situation of Ishmael, sacrificed by the system of inheritance, and already jealous of their better situated brothers, or at least this is how an ancient audience sees it? But then, why does Joseph want to be close to them: is he attracted by the rough side they present to him, as rebellious sons? More generally speaking, what are Joseph’s brothers doing? One answer is provided in Gen 38, and in the person of Judah. The larger question is that of the political views of the authors: clearly, what is being rehearsed mezzo voce is the respective role of Judah and Israel in history. If the authors write at the time of the exile, why give pride of place to Joseph? Why name Joseph first in the lineage of Jacob, in a subversion of generations and history? Note that the root “Joseph” has the meanings of “will gather or collect, will add, again.”

¹Note in what contexts Abraham and other ancestors are featured, for instance in the prophetic books.

37.3

וְיִשְׂרָאֵל אָהַב אֶת-יוֹסֵף מִכָּל-בָּנָיו כִּי-בֶן-זָקֵנִים הוּא לוֹ וַעֲשָׂה לוֹ כְּתֹנֶת פָּסִים *And Israel loved Joseph more than all his sons because he was his son of old age, and he made him a color coat. Or: a long coat.* “Son of his old age:” this would suit Benjamin better and is an odd reason. The real reason, one surmises, is that this metaphor is a way of saying that Jacob waited long to have a son by Rachel, the chosen one. The problem (a general, theoretical one) is that to set love as a foundation of society is a risky proposition, no matter modern superficialities about this idea. Love, though wished for, could not be expected and was actually considered disruptive of social order. This may be the reason why the Biblical writers so often join barrenness to love and/or beauty.²

Anthropologically speaking, rather than psychologically, why would a son obtained in old age, בֶּן-זָקֵנִים, be favored, except because this favoritism reverses the normal scheme of inheritance and political continuation (criticized in entertaining fashion in folktales in many cultures, but furthermore understood to end up in failure by Judaeans and Israelites who have learned this lesson the hard way, in a long history)? And doesn’t this favoritism for second- or late-born children—Jacob himself is second-born by a second or two—turn into the exact same kind of rigidity when it comes to the transfer of dynastic or inheritance power that is being criticized by the historicized folk theme in the first place? The sign of Jacob’s favoritism (which is an image or re-figuration of Rebekah’s favoritism of Jacob) is this special coat, perhaps a coat with sleeves, with extra length, or polychrome.³ The discussions or hesitations about its shape and coloring, settled in extremis by the brothers who dye it a dark vermilion, can’t mask its true meaning, which is that it is a royal garment, or a prefiguration of it. This coat, according to some targumim and midrashim, is the original clothing given by the di-

²Compare to the reasoning done by Plato in *The symposium*. The stories and ironies regarding homosexual love by an older man for a young ephebe in military training come from the same concern as in the Bible. Namely, that normal man/woman arrangements are not a province of choice but of duty. Love can be played out and imagined more fully only in a non-reproductive relationship. The Bible doesn’t go quite as far, but the non-reproductivity of the relationship is quite often very severe, precisely to mark the depth and strength of the choice made by the heroes. One thinks especially of Abraham and Jacob in this regard.

³If we follow the standard Septuagint Greek, but Aquila, a second-century AD Greek translator, perhaps had “[going to] the ankles”) (cf. the seamless tunic of Jesus in the story of the passion).

vinity to Adam and Eve (what of Eve's set in the commentaries, however? Disappeared, by lack of need?). There are speculations about Joseph's role as a prefiguration of the suffering messiah, as different, but paired with, the son of David, the triumphant messiah. Note that Jacob is called Israel here. This seems to be the mark of a later author keen to show that the inhabitants of the northern Israel kingdom are the descendants of Ephraim and Manasseh, Joseph's sons, and that there is a direct line from Jacob/Israel to the historical Israel.

37.4

וַיֵּרְאוּ אָחָיו כִּי־אֵתוֹ אָהָב אָבִיהֶם מִכָּל־אָחָיו וַיִּשְׁנָאוּ אֹתוֹ וְלֹא יָכְלוּ דַבָּרוֹ לְשָׁלָם: *And his brothers saw that it was him that their father loved above all his brothers and they hated him, and they couldn't say to him a word of peace.* Joseph is hated before he utters his dreams of domination. This is similar to the hate that Cain feels for Abel, and the brothers may feel justified in their jealousy: the order of wives and concubines in a large patriarchal family, to select one feature, per force introduces fears for one's security inside the family and calculations duplicated or rather multiplied by the children.

37.5-11

The dreams regarding brothers and family, on earth and in the skies, are double, as in Gen 40 and 41. Everything in the story is actually paired: dreams, pit and prison, brothers, trips to Egypt, Joseph himself (with Benjamin, but also through his own descendance). These dreams replace direct intervention. They are signs of divine providence, to be interpreted. Joseph becomes an interpreter, a kind of prophet, for Pharaoh (as does Daniel for the Babylonian king).

His name, Joseph, is a harbinger of the "accumulation" or "adding" of dreams and the "harvesting" he is about to do in Egypt. His dreams lead to an "accumulation" of hate against him: his brothers "josephed" more and more hate... Interesting note by Rashi on the second dream: isn't his mother already dead? Then why does Jacob mention her? Is it because Bilhah acts as his mother, which is an enticing idea? Or better that Jacob wants to protect Joseph against his brothers' jealousy and therefore mentions his mother, in such a way as to make them understand that if the dream mentions the mother, who is already dead, then the dream can't be exact either about his brothers.

37.11

וַיִּקְנְאוּ־בּוֹ אֶחָיו וְאָבִיו שָׁמַר אֶת־הַדָּבָר: *And his brothers were jealous of him, and his father kept the thing (at heart? to himself?).* The Hebrew word for jealousy echoes the name of Cain, and fratricide (and more broadly and accurately in this story that is rethinking monarchy and government, property versus grabbing, creation versus inheritance). His father kept the thing (in his heart): cf. Lk 2.51, which is also a story of reversal. Does Jacob realize the intensity of the jealousy, or is he blind to it (as blind as his father Isaac, and forgetful of his own struggles in his youth)? Rashi and the rest of the tradition seem intent on thinking that the father, who also has suffered at his brother's hand, already knows.

37.12ff

וַיֵּלְכוּ אֶחָיו לְרֵעוֹת אֶת־צֹאן אֲבֵיהֶם בְּשֶׁכֶם: *And his brothers went to pasture their father's herd in Schechem.* There is something problematic in this going (often a going out, or implying going into the wild or the “field”), and entailing a dissolution of rules and law. Perhaps the problem is purely lexical, in the echo of “badness” that trails the *לרעות* (*to pasture*)? It is reinforced nevertheless by the place they are reaching, Schechem, a place marked as Canaanite (or Hivvite) in the previous story of Dinah, i.e. a place given to foreign gods. The author is thinking of the historical polytheism practiced in their capitals by Israelite kings in the 9th to 7th c. (and longer even by inhabitants of the country, witness Ezekiel)?

Why does Jacob send Joseph to check on the other ten brothers? One may understand that Jacob has little choice. The sons by different mothers need supervision as they themselves are in charge of capital and may be tempted to further their own interests. This tension is illustrated in Gen 38, when Judah appears to do what he likes and threatens his own heritage. Further, Jacob can only send Joseph for this work of supervision. No other brother would tell on their own closely related group. Joseph, however, is the first son of Rachel, the beloved or chosen wife, whereas eight of the brothers are by Leah, her servant, or Rachel's servant. If there is competition between the wives or substitute wives, as the Bible clearly says, one may suspect that the jealousy between brothers or groups of brothers is even keener because more vicarious. Notice how liberally they use the goats of the herd (a theme taken up again, because of this story, I venture to say, by the second son in the Lucan parable of the prodigal son). The

desire to have a meal with meat, from a stolen or at least unassigned beast, in a group constituted against others, a fraternity, serves here as symbol of what goes wrong in politics: sharing in small groups, against the interests of the larger group. The story of Judah in Gen 38 also shows the liberties an older son takes with his parents, social group's mores, and associations.

Sichem = Schechem: in the northern mountain massif, about 3 days walk from Hebron, which is at the southern tip of the mountain region. Westermann notes the problem of the geography, after other scholars, presumably because he and they are still concerned to establish or live with some semblance of historicity. If replaced in a context of later, deep, experiential reflection on the fall of the monarchies in the seventh-sixth centuries BCE and the conditions of good government—as much of a historical background as a putative patriarchal age—the geography is not odd at all. Both kingdoms “to come” are included, and aspects of their historical choices hinted at (polytheism in the use of Schechem and Dotan). [check this argument again]

37.13

וַיֹּאמֶר יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל-יוֹסֵף הֲלוֹא אֶחָיֶךָ רְעִים בְּשֹׂכֶם לָכֵה וְאֶשְׁלַחְךָ אֲלֵיהֶם וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ הֲגִנִי: *And Israel said to Joseph: “Aren’t your brothers pasturing [the flocks] in Schechem? Go, I’m sending you to them;” and he said to him: “Here I am”.* Are the brothers hungry and waiting for special food from home (fresh pita; fruit perhaps; virgin olive oil; perhaps wine?). They eat Joseph? not quite, says the story.

Note for comparison the gospel parable in which a king/master sends his son to the tenants (Mt 21, Mk 12, Lk 20). Compare also with the Talmud stories about a son being sent to workers or tenants to manage them and who is asked by workers to feed them as the master doesn’t seem to be coming to “feed” them. The son does it, by praying God for a miracle and obtaining fruit “out of season.” But it is at his own risk of being himself “harvested out of season,” a judgment cast by the father who finally arrives and proffers the excuse that he was delayed by works of charity.

A sacrificial reading, in view of the story of Abraham and Isaac, the *hinneni*, the fact that Jacob was aware of the brothers’ hate, and also that he immediately will go into mourning, goes along with the midrashic interpretation. But the midrash adds, cautiously, that Jacob foresaw the events (see Gen 37.11), and was also willing (as Joseph was apparently,

rash young thing that he was) to fulfill the “deep designs” of providence (the Holy One)....

In vss. 12ff., all the brothers are involved, not only Bilha’s and Zilpa’s sons, but the story is told from two different angles: paternal preference leads to thoughts of murder, stopped by Judah—son number four of Leah—who advises selling to Ishmaelites; or the outlandish dreams lead to similar murderous thoughts, blocked by Reuben—son number one of Leah—, after he has been sold to passing Midianites. One standard explanation is that the J and E documents or traditions (De Vaux) have been mixed, so well mixed in fact that several scholars question the usefulness of the documentary hypothesis in regard to this story. One can read the seemingly contradictory stories as one: Judah, by selling Joseph to the Ishmaelites for 20 shekels of silver, is spiting Reuben, the older son (Judah is the younger son of the first set of sons by Leah), who is trying to save Joseph. Judah, in the author’s view, has his own agenda, as will be displayed fully in Gen 38.⁴

For memoir: Girard’s thesis on the origin of culture has here one of its most important texts. He explains non-biblical myths and rituals as systematically covering up their own origins and succeeding in mystifying even modern interpreters. The five stages in the development of culture start with mimetic violence threatening to engulf everyone. A paradigmatic victim is found and transformed into a scapegoat loaded with all sorts of disabilities. After the sacrifice done in a frensy typical of crowds, a catharsis occurs, a feeling of peace, the relief of having escaped a terrible catastrophe. This leads to the transformation of the victim into an entirely different perspective: a savior, a divine being. One may then hope to restore this feeling of peace by repeating sacrifices (memorial), rituals, and myths regarding the divinity or hero. In the Bible on the contrary, and paradigmatically in the story of Joseph, the mechanism of mimetic violence and victimation is laid bare. Joseph’s brothers gang up on him as a murderous crowd and end up killing him (they think). The story shows clearly that Joseph is a victim, and that the remedy to the violence is not ritual commemoration in sacrifices of his killing and his re-mythisation, but recognition of one’s injustice and wickedness, and hope for forgiveness.⁵

⁴Note that one of Jesus’ twelve disciples, Judah, will betray him, but for a different sum. Cf. Zech 11.12–13.

⁵(Girard 1972); (Hamerton-Kelly 1987).

37.17

וַיֹּאמֶר הָאִישׁ נִסְעוּ מִזֶּה כִּי שָׁמַעְתִּי אֲמָרִים נִלְכָּה דְתִינָה וַיֵּלֶךְ יוֹסֵף אַחֲרֵי אֶחָיו וַיִּמְצְאֵם בְּדוֹתָן:
And the man said: "They left here but I heard them saying, 'Let's go to Dothan.'" And Joseph went after his brothers and found them in Dothan.
 Dothan: about ten miles to the north of Schechem.

37.25

וַיֵּשְׁבוּ לֶאֱכֹל-לֶחֶם וַיֵּשְׂאוּ עֵינֵיהֶם וַיֵּרְאוּ וְהִנֵּה אֲרֻחַת יִשְׁמַעֲאֵלִים בָּאָה מִגִּלְעָד וּגְמִלֵיהֶם נִשְׂאִים
 :מִצְרִימָה: נִבְאָת וְצָרִי וְלֹט הוֹלְכִים לְהוֹרִיד מִצְרִימָה: *And they sat to eat bread, and they lifted their eyes....* Notice the meal of the brothers: it is once expressed, but implied the second time, that is, after they killed the he-goat in 31, whose flesh, I assume, would be understood by ancient audiences as surely having been consumed by the murderous brothers.

37.31–33

וַיִּקְחוּ אֶת-כִּתְנֵת יוֹסֵף וַיִּשְׁחֲטוּ שְׂעִיר עִזִּים וַיִּטְבְּלוּ אֶת-הַכִּתְנֵת בַּדָּם:
And they took Joseph's tunic, and they killed a he-goat, and they dipped the tunic in the blood. Joseph's tunic is dipped in the blood of a he-goat (שְׂעִיר עִזִּים ; but see Greek versions, which understand "kid"). Jacob will be fooled by a goat's blood, a revisiting of his own tricks, since it is by using the same kind of deception that he shouldered his fate (the blessing). Does he understand what has happened and play the fool? An important subtext is that kings were dressed in purple (from ancient days?), and the tunic dipped in blood, which has been earlier on described as "multi-colored" (one possible meaning), is indicating an important meaning of the purple-dyed garments of kings. Instead of the military glory that this purple might indicate, however, we have here a sacrificial reading.

Girard, René. 1972. *La Violence et Le Sacré*. Paris: Grasset.

Hamerton-Kelly, Robert G., ed. 1987. *Violent Origins*. Walter Burkert, René Girard & Jonathan Z. Smith on Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.