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Forgiveness as Private and Public Act: A Reading of the Biblical Joseph Narrative

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THE AIM OF THE PRESENT ARTICLE is to consider how far the actions of the leading characters in Genesis 37–50 may be held to reveal their character and purposes, and so whether they are susceptible of moral evaluation by the reader. Such an aim raises a number of questions of method and approach, including whether Genesis 37–50 is a unified narrative, and how far its setting and purpose may be determined, as well as questions that bear more directly on narrative interpretation. The distinctiveness of the narrative in the context of the Book of Genesis has long been recognized, and its appearance of essential unity made it difficult to assimilate to the classic pentateuchal sources.¹ Source criticism continued to have a certain influence, however, where, as in Donald Redford's analysis, a dominant "Reuben" version of the story was thought to have been supplemented by "Judah" sections. Redford nevertheless marked a decisive shift toward the reading of the story as a unity, whose date and setting must be evaluated separately from the source documents J and E.² In his opinion, the story appeared to be essentially the

¹ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 37–50* (trans. John J. Scullion, S.J.; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986) 19. Compare George W. Coats, *Genesis with an Introduction to Narrative Literature* (FOTL 1; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 271.

² Donald B. Redford, *A Study of the Biblical Story of Joseph (Genesis 37–50)* (VTSup 20; Leiden: Brill, 1970) 251–53. See also Lawrence M. Wills, *The Jew in the Court of the Foreign King: Ancient Jewish Court Legends* (HDR 26; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 54–55.

work of a single author “of surpassing ability,” not least in the “portrayal of character, and the keen awareness of human nature.”³

Recent readings of the narrative have increasingly concentrated on its interpretation as a whole and on the characters it portrays. In such studies, the question of the story’s theme, often identified as reconciliation, is prominent.⁴ Yet the challenge of identifying the theme of the story poses new questions concerning the capacities and limitations of narrative to convey character and purpose.⁵ Does the story bring closure to its theme, and can one be sure whether characters are reliably conveyed?⁶ It is with such questions that I am concerned here.

Are the characters’ actions, then, susceptible of the reader’s moral evaluation? The events of the story are manifestly charged with moral significance, since they have to do with enmity, violence, reconciliation, and the use of power. Yet at the same time, the reasons for the characters’ behavior, and therefore the moral nature of their actions, do not lie on the surface. The point is put well by Meir Sternberg:

However transparent the start and finish, operating as reference points along an “unhappiness to happiness” line to safeguard foolproof composition, the causal movement that bridges them by reversing the one into the other retains much of its opacity. And it is of course no accident that the delimiting reference points consist in externals and the bridging or motivating forces in internals.⁷

The key question concerns why Joseph behaves as he does toward his brothers when they come to him in Egypt to buy food (Genesis 42–45). Does he forgive them for their previous murderous behavior toward him, thus furnishing us with

³ Redford, *Joseph*, 246.

⁴ This is identified, for example, by Georg Fischer, “Die Josefsgeschichte als Modell für Versöhnung,” in *Studies in the Book of Genesis: Literature, Redaction and History* (ed. A. Wénin; BETL 155; Leuven: University Press/Peeters, 2001) 243–71. Hugh C. White identified the same theme, but based his study on a presumed original version of the story in Genesis 37, 39–45, 50 (*Narration and Discourse in the Book of Genesis* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991] 232–75). Others have found the theme to be rather divine providence, as signified notably in the fulfillment of Joseph’s dreams. On this, and his own rejection of it, see Laurence A. Turner, *Announcements of Plot in Genesis* (JSOTSup 96; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990) 166–69.

⁵ On some readings, the portrayal of character is limited, for example, where the narrative is regarded as a “court legend,” in which, as Wills has it, “the principal characters often come to stand for ethnic groups in competition for social position” (*Jew in the Court of the Foreign King*, 19).

⁶ Yiu-Wing Fung, for example, agreeing that “brotherhood and reconciliation [are] indeed a central theme of the story,” finds that there is no simple resolution in these terms. In his view, Jacob and Joseph continue to manifest their old character faults, and, rather than resolution, the story exhibits the difficulties in the way of reconciliation among brothers (*Victim and Victimizer: Joseph’s Interpretation of His Destiny* [JSOTSup 308; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000] 169). Fung (p. 166) also challenges White’s belief (*Narrative and Discourse*, 269–70) that Joseph’s view at the end of the story is effectively equivalent to God’s.

⁷ Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Indiana Literary Biblical Studies; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985) 304.

one of the OT's most profound examples of such an act? Or do the reasons for his actions elude the reader, so that they are beyond evaluation? In traditional interpretations, Joseph is a Christlike figure who acts as the judge of the brothers' behavior, testing them to see whether they will continue in their murderous tendencies or whether they have reformed. The excellent moral character of Joseph himself is assumed, as is his clarity of moral purpose, even if perplexity at aspects of his actions sometimes appears.⁸ This position is well represented among modern scholars. Georg Fischer, for example, finds that by the beginning of chap. 42, Joseph has been transformed through experience and humiliation to a maturity of character as well as practical ability. His dealings with his brothers are therefore regarded as a well-conceived "test."⁹

For other interpreters, Joseph's deepest intentions are harder to read and may even be sinister.¹⁰ The relative inscrutability of Joseph's motives is expressed by Claus Westermann as follows: "It is a misunderstanding of the narrative to prescind from the course of events and to judge Joseph's conduct morally, to defend it, or to gloss it over."¹¹ He approves of John Skinner's appraisal that "[i]t is unnecessary to suppose that the writers traced in all this the unfolding of a constant ethical purpose."¹² Is it then the case that the story offers little to ethical reflection? We turn to the narrative to consider the question.

I. The Narrative

Two factors may be observed at the outset. First, there is in the story an apparent trajectory from initial toxic familial relationships to a restoration of the

⁸ See examples from Ambrose, Chrysostom, and others cited in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament*, vol. 2, *Genesis 12–50* (ed. Mark Sheridan; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002) 276–84. The Qur'an's Yusuf belongs in this tradition, as does Thomas Mann's Joseph in his novel *Joseph and His Brothers* (1939; London: Penguin, 1978). John Calvin is broadly in agreement but shows an awareness of the problematic nature of Joseph as an example of moral rectitude. Troubled by Joseph's duplicity, he thinks it may enjoy special divine sanction. Even so, he does not think "that we ought to be very anxious to excuse Joseph, because it is probable that he suffered something from human infirmity, which God forgave him" (Calvin, *Genesis* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965] 339–40).

⁹ Fischer, "Josefsgeschichte," 247–51. For similar views, see Bruce Vawter, *On Genesis: A New Reading* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1977) 418; Victor Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 523.

¹⁰ Nahum M. Sarna thinks that Joseph may merely aim pragmatically to ensure the well-being of his father and Benjamin and the larger family unit in Canaan (*Genesis בראשית: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* [JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989] 293–94). For Fung, Joseph's "test" may actually deal a "crushing blow" to his father (*Victim and Victimizer*, 175–76).

¹¹ Westermann, *Genesis 37–50*, 107.

¹² *Ibid.*, citing John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (ICC; Edinburgh: Clark, 1910) 475.

family's unity and integrity. Second, there is a relationship between the private or inner world of the main characters and the public world in which Joseph wields virtually supreme power in Egypt. The opening verses display the first of these factors and set the scene:

This is the story of the family of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him. (Gen 37:2-4 *NRSV*)

In this divided house, Jacob's old preference for Rachel, the mother of Joseph and Benjamin, lives on. Though the "brothers" appear as a bloc here and elsewhere in the story, one senses the marginality of "the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah" and a hierarchy of affection. Jacob has made his preferential feelings clear for all to see, in Joseph's garment of distinction. The young favorite stirs up ill-feeling with his "bad report"; they hate him, and there is no "peace" (שלום) between them.

The drama of the story unfolds from this initial situation. Its substance is briefly as follows: Joseph is exiled to Egypt as a result of his ten brothers' hatred of him, exacerbated by his own indiscreet provocation through the disclosure of dreams that appeared to set him above them. In Egypt he acquires a reputation as an interpreter of dreams (while in jail, having been falsely accused by Potiphar's wife), interprets dreams of Pharaoh to indicate imminent famine, and as a result is promoted to great power (Gen 41:42). By wise exercise of this power, he enables Egypt to survive the famine, which affects Canaan too. In due course, Joseph's ten brothers come to Egypt to buy food. Joseph imprisons one of them, sending the other nine home with food, in order to put pressure on them to return with Jacob's twelfth son, Benjamin, which they (eventually) do, after great resistance from Jacob (since Benjamin has taken Joseph's place in their father's affections). Joseph subjects his brothers to a further trial before at last revealing his identity. He declares that he feels no hostility toward them and brings the whole family to settle in Egypt, with the explanation that, though they meant harm to him, God used their actions to bring about good. The outcome is the restoration of the family and an overcoming of the deep fissures that had existed in it at the beginning.

The story thus told illustrates, at one level, the providential hand of God overruling events in such a way as to bring good out of evil (Joseph twice makes this point in retrospective explanation: 45:5-8; 50:20-21). But it also brings out the close interplay between the characters' private lives, involving family relationships and individual emotions, and events in the public sphere. This seems to me to be an important dimension of the question why Joseph behaves as he does toward his brothers, and whether his character can be read. Joseph is indeed hard to read

because many of his actions, mainly toward his brothers in Egypt, are enigmatic. For example, why did he not attempt to communicate with his family in the first place, once he came to power in Egypt?¹³ Equally, why does he now conceal his identity from his brothers when they arrive in their search for food? Is his silence purposeful, or merely a narrative necessity?

Yet the narrative is such that it is difficult to avoid seeking a purpose in Joseph's actions, not least because he acts with apparent decisiveness from the outset. He accuses the brothers of being spies (42:9), imprisons them for three days, virtually threatens their lives (42:17-18), keeps a hostage for maybe a year as a guarantee of their return with Benjamin (42:19-20), and tricks them by replacing in their sacks the money with which they had purchased grain, causing them to fear retribution on their return (42:28; 43:18-22). He adopts a similar ploy, only with an even stronger implication of theft, on their second trip, with Benjamin, and they are rearrested just when they think they have gotten away (44:1-5). The sequence is extraordinarily protracted in real time, which is especially intriguing because Joseph is desperate for assurance that his father is still alive, and indeed desperate to see him again before the old man dies. Is Joseph driven by a clear purpose throughout these events, whether for good or evil?¹⁴ Or do we see instead a figure who is coming to terms with a humanly conflicted situation between his own inner and private interests and his public role?

There are strong suggestions of an inner conflict in Joseph as he does these things, particularly in the striking discrepancy between his public appearance and his private emotion. Outwardly he is unrecognizable to the brothers. The man they meet in Egypt is vastly different from the boy they dispatched years before, having gone through multiple transformations: Palestine to Egypt, boy to man, slave to free, private person to public figure. He is reinvented by Pharaoh as an Egyptian aristocrat. He even appears to embrace this rebranding when he names his

¹³ Ron Pirson notes that, in the years since Joseph became powerful, he made no attempt to contact his family. He thinks further that Joseph's explanation of the name Manasseh ("he has made me forget all my hardship and my father's house"; 41:51 *NRSV*) casts Joseph in a poor light (*The Lord of the Dreams: A Semantic and Literary Analysis of Genesis 37-50* [JSOTSup 355; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002] 92).

¹⁴ These opposing possibilities both have been defended. Gerhard von Rad saw the figure of Joseph as essentially embodying the values of a wisdom school, with affinities to Egypt, in which wisdom, self-restraint, and acting for the good of the community are the paramount values ("The Joseph Narrative and Ancient Wisdom," in idem, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* [trans. E. W. Trueman Dicken; 1958; London: SCM, 1984] 292-300). In contrast, George W. Coats finds a sharp division between the picture of Joseph as "ideal administrator" in chaps. 39-41 and as the very negation of this in chap. 42, where Joseph reverts to the egocentricity of chap. 37 (*From Canaan to Egypt: Structural and Theological Context for the Joseph Story* [CBQMS 4; Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1976] 32, 38). Each of these approaches underestimates, I think, the possibility that Joseph undergoes a change in his dealings with the brothers in Egypt.

first child by his Egyptian wife Manasseh, with the gloss “God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father’s house” (Gen 41:51 *NRSV*). The man encountered by the brothers is unrecognizable to them because of his external metamorphosis.

The inscrutability of Joseph is highlighted by the narrative, with its motif of the “face.”¹⁵ The word “face” (פָּנִים) occurs twelve times between 43:3 and 45:3,¹⁶ in relation to the brothers’ failure to recognize Joseph while in his presence, culminating in their astonishment at the moment when they know that the “face” is Joseph’s (45:3). The brothers recount several times Joseph’s warning that, if they do not bring Benjamin with them on their return to Egypt, they will not “see his face” (43:3, 5; 44:23, 26). To “see the face” is a conventional expression for “coming into the presence” of someone. Here it is a public “face,” connoting at one level the power with which the person is invested. Yet, in the context, it is also the sort one might “put on,” precisely to hide the person rather than disclose him. The motif of the “face,” therefore, is symbolic of the interplay between the public and private roles that Joseph assumes. The boundary between public and private is exposed to the reader (though not to the brothers) when Joseph, overcome by emotion at his first sight of Benjamin, withdraws to a private room to weep, then “washes his face” in order to reemerge (43:30–31). Joseph the public man cannot negate his past, his natural affinities, or his memory (in spite of “Manasseh”). The scenario of a callous revenge taking is strained because of these glimpses of Joseph’s deep and hidden emotion,¹⁷ and is based on too narrow a concept of the issues in the narrative.

II. On Intentions

So what goes on in the minds and hearts of these characters? If biblical narration produces “both sharply defined surfaces and a sense of ambiguous depths

¹⁵ Thomas L. Brodie observes “a connection between ‘the brother’ and ‘the face’ (43:3), between bringing their brother Benjamin and seeing the man’s face,” but he does not pursue it (*Genesis as Dialogue: A Literary, Historical, and Theological Commentary* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001] 383).

¹⁶ Genesis 43:3, 5, 9, 14, 15, 31, 33, 34; 44:14, 23, 26; 45:3. These occurrences include the form לִפְנֵי (often “before”), which here enters fully into the repetitive emphasis on פָּנִים. The word occurs also in 44:29, referring to Jacob’s “face,” or presence, perhaps in an antiphonal echo. The motif continues to the end of the book, and functions, in dramatic contrast to the usage in 43:3–45:3, to express intimacy between Joseph and his father and brothers, who now see him with recognition and emotion (46:30; 48:11). Joseph even throws himself on his father’s “face” (50:1) and weeps and kisses him. There is a further contrastive use of the motif in chap. 47, there of Pharaoh’s face.

¹⁷ White (*Narration and Discourse*, 259–60) notes the emotional effect that the deception has on Joseph. For White, the issue is how long Joseph can maintain his deception in the face of the inner anguish he is feeling.

in character," as Robert Alter remarked about the story of King David,¹⁸ our narrative offers a supreme example of this. According to some readings, as I have noted, Joseph acts from the start according to a clear moral purpose to bring about reconciliation in the family. Yet there are gaps that disturb this theory. At their first encounter in Egypt, although Joseph decides immediately on disguise and on a plan to bring Benjamin to him, he seems to hesitate about how to go about it. His first thought is to imprison all the brothers except one, who would be sent on the mission to bring Benjamin—hence the three-day incarceration. But by the third day he has reversed this, keeping only one behind and sending the rest home with the grain. Many interpret the imprisonment according to Joseph's well-conceived plan. Yet equally, it may be a moment when he contemplates revenge but thinks better of it and decides upon a strategy of full reconciliation.¹⁹

The gap is massive at this point, because of what we know transpired between these men. The pause created by the three-day imprisonment of the ten creates a space for us to contemplate Joseph's possible ruminations. As has been well observed, the entire narrative is structured so as to bring the narrated past to bear on its "present," and therefore the role of memory has an important function in its interpretation.²⁰ In the present encounter, the weight of the past is such that we are bound to imagine Joseph reviewing it, how he might read it, and what responses he might make. Sternberg's account of the narrative is entitled "Joseph and His Brothers: Making Sense of the Past."²¹ For Barbara Green, too, memory is crucial—that of the characters as well as that of the readers. The theme is pointed up by the naming of Manasseh (41:51), paradoxically a memorializing of what is declared forgotten.²²

¹⁸ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic, 1981) 117. Cf. W. Lee Humphreys, *Joseph and His Family: A Literary Study* (Studies on Personalities of the Old Testament; Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988) 89-90.

¹⁹ Westermann (*Genesis 37-50*, 109) thinks that Joseph has to imprison the brothers to show that he is serious about his charge of spying; cf. Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 523; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50* (WBC 2; Dallas: Word, 1994) 407-8. For White (*Narration and Discourse*, 259), the issue is not whether Joseph hesitates but whether he can maintain the self-control to see the plan through, in view of his emotional stress. Those who think that Joseph may actually hesitate include Sama (*Genesis*, 294) and James McKeown (*Genesis* [Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008] 174), who thinks that Joseph imprisons the brothers "while he decides what to do."

²⁰ Fischer ("Josefsgeschichte," 261-62) finds that the story of Jacob in Genesis 37-50 involves reflections on his past as narrated earlier in the ancestral narratives. Jacob's deception of his father, Isaac (chap. 27), and subsequent reconciliation with his brother Esau (chaps. 32-33) now play out, first in his being deceived by his own sons (chap. 37), then in his disposition to bring about reconciliation in his family across the generations (chaps. 46-49). The recurrence of analogous situations is a key part of this (pp. 259-60, citing Herbert Donner, "Die literarische Gestalt der alttestamentlichen Josepshgeschichte" (1976), in idem, *Aufsätze zum Alten Testament: Aus vier Jahrzehnten* [BZAW 224; Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1994] 76-120, here 106).

²¹ Sternberg, *Poetics*, 285.

²² "To memorialize the events that one has forgotten is a complex gesture" (Barbara Green,

Notwithstanding his point about the opacity of the thought processes that lead to the story's outcome, Sternberg proposes "a threefold psychological movement" in Joseph: "from death-to-life thoughts, from a fixation about the past to shaping the future, and from egocentricity through selective fraternity to a sense of familial responsibility. Joseph's horizon has widened," and his thoughts of revenge seem to recede.²³ The brothers repent openly—"and so does he, by implication, of his evil designs against them."²⁴ Sternberg's analysis extends to the brothers too, for they are also reviewing the past and turning thought into speech. To take one example at this stage, Reuben had in fact spoken first against killing Joseph (37:21-22) and was struck with remorse or terror when he discovered that Joseph had been removed from the pit (vv. 29-30). Now, confronted with the accusing Egyptian official, he says, "Did I not tell you not to sin against the boy? But you did not listen. Now there comes a reckoning for his blood" (42:22 *NRSV*). This goes beyond what we are told in chap. 37. Reuben's memory of his role has crystallized into complete and express dissociation from the other brothers' actions and a castigation of their action as "sin." Is he justified in this? Commentators divide on whether to give Reuben the benefit of the doubt.²⁵

In fact, one can read the story without supposing that the characters undergo profound inner transformation. Mignon Jacobs offers an alternative to the proposal of a linear development from bad to good. For her, characters are capable of both good and evil acts, actions as such may be only relatively good or evil, and there is no necessary connection between good acts and good outcomes (or the reverse).²⁶ God uses events to bring good but does not control everything, such as human actions and intentions.²⁷ In Jacobs's opinion, Joseph clearly behaves in a hostile way to the brothers. Did he intend them harm? The text, she thinks, is ambiguous. But she separates the outward act from the inner intention. Joseph's "good" is constituted by his acting responsibly to preserve life—it does not preclude his scheming and "vengeful acts."²⁸ Crucially in her reading, "reconciliation comes about without a . . . confession of evil."²⁹ The brothers do not ask Joseph's forgiveness, nor does Joseph ask theirs. Reconciliation comes about not by reflecting on the past and asking forgiveness but by building a common future.

What Profit For Us? Remembering the Story of Joseph (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1996) 119.

²³ Sternberg, *Poetics*, 290.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 291.

²⁵ *Ibid.* Sternberg thinks that Reuben speaks truthfully, while Green (*What Profit?* 123) thinks there is some self-deception in his memory of the event.

²⁶ Mignon Jacobs, "The Conceptual Dynamics of Good and Evil in the Joseph Story: An Exegetical and Hermeneutical Enquiry," *JSOT* 27 (2003) 309-38, esp. 331-35.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 334-35.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 326.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 337. Against this, Fischer ("Josefsgeschichte," 257) observes that the brothers actually confess their wrongdoing and ask for forgiveness in 50:17.

Here is a different model from Sternberg's. Joseph does not forgive but overcomes his private desire for revenge in the interests of public order. But has Jacobs rightly described the relationship between emotion and action? Or is there not rather an integrity between the inner life and outward act? I want to offer two reflections on this, one on the connection between thought and speech in the narrative, and one on the private and public spheres.

III. Thought and Speech

One of the factors in deciding whether the characters undergo change in the narrative is whether we can believe what they say. Is their speech a reliable guide to their inner life? The question is hugely important not only in this narrative but in the OT generally, where there is a close connection of thought, speech, and action. False speech is serious enough to rate a commandment to itself (Exod 20:16)!

The Joseph narrative is carried to a large extent by speech, but in addition the function and capacity of speech are apparently part of its theme, as is apparent from the opening verses of the narrative (37:2-4). In the beginning, the brothers could not speak "peaceably" (literally "peace," שלום) to Joseph. It is a long time before they are able to speak together in peace (45:15). If the story is one of healing, part of it is undoubtedly the healing of speech.

In their first encounter with Joseph in Egypt, the brothers are desperate to tell the truth. It spills out of them. They are not spies! Outrageous thought. "We have come from the land of Canaan to buy food" (42:7); "We are all sons of one man; we are honest men; your servants have never been spies" (42:11). And as the pressure mounts: "We, your servants, are twelve brothers, the sons of a certain man in the land of Canaan; the youngest, however, is now with our father, and one is no more" (42:13). Why do they say so much? Here are facts beyond the call of the situation—as Jacob would later point out (43:6)!³⁰ We know, of course (and Joseph knows), that they are not "honest men," on the broader canvas of their family history. And the telling statement "One is no more" passes over the reason why, though it no doubt speaks volumes to the guilty conscience from which it presumably came.

The narrative affords opportunities to test the brothers' speech, because it shows them several times retelling in one scene what they have seen or heard in another (the two scenes being Palestine and Egypt). And this makes clear that they are aware of the effect they are producing in the way in which they speak.³¹ For

³⁰ Cf. Coats, *From Canaan to Egypt*, 34: "Significantly, no question elicits the information about the family."

³¹ Pirson (*Lord of the Dreams*, 104) thinks that, when this speech is compared with the previous conversations in the story, Judah is creative in it, and indeed that he "contributes to the characterization of Joseph." He takes a somewhat negative view of this creativity, however, suggesting that "Judah is manipulating the facts to change Joseph's decision to keep Benjamin in Egypt as a

example, in 42:29-34, where they recount to Jacob the first exchange between themselves and Joseph (cf. vv. 7-17), they follow the original carefully, repeating each element with slight variations (v. 32; cf. v. 13). But when they tell of Joseph's treatment of them, they pass over their three-day imprisonment (vv. 33-34) and play down the most threatening aspect of Joseph's words. Why do they do this? Perhaps to allay Jacob's fears, and so out of compassion—or perhaps only because they know they must persuade him at some point to part with Benjamin. But as we become alert to their self-consciousness in choosing how to speak, we see them as “interpreters.”

As the narrative reaches its climax, the brothers' speech has persuaded neither the reader nor Joseph of their integrity. This is clear in Joseph's last turn of the screw, when he arranges that Benjamin should appear to be guilty of stealing his divining cup (44:1-5). Accused once more, the brothers protest at the steward's speech of false accusation: “Why does my lord speak such words as these?” (44:7), and they unwittingly invoke a curse on Benjamin (44:9).

Yet in Judah's final appeal, the story of broken speech, harking back to 37:2-4, reaches its conclusion (44:18-34). Why should we believe it? Two new things happen. First, Judah conveys the perspective of Jacob. He speaks of Jacob's special love for Benjamin, the only one left of his mother's children after the death of Joseph (v. 20), and of how the loss of Benjamin would kill him (v. 22).

He then brings the voice of Jacob himself into the discourse (44:27-29). This is a conflation and re-presentation of two speeches (37:33; 42:38), and so the brothers are interpreters again. Judah as rhetor and editor has furnished the opening: “You know that my wife bore me two sons; one left me, and I said . . .” (v. 28), and in the same verse: “and I have never seen him since.” The re-presentation of Jacob's words testifies to an imaginative identification with Jacob in his anguish. Here is conveyed the whole story of the family divided, Jacob's fateful partiality and the brothers' own murderous acts.

The power of this speech is manifest. Judah's rereading of the history has a force that is addressed to himself and the brothers as much as to Joseph.³² For who may be affected most deeply by the phrase “My wife bore me two sons”—the ten brothers or this stranger? There is more here than a stranger strictly needs to know. Judah's words call the ten to see the reality of their lives in a new way, to feel the grief of their father and the gravity of their own violence. At the same time, Judah's eloquence has a powerful effect on Joseph, who is not after all the stranger they think he is but the one at the center of the story. Joseph now hears the words

slave.” In order to maintain this, however, he has to suppose that Judah already suspects that “the man” is indeed Joseph, on the grounds that he shows an interest in the family beyond what one might expect (p. 108). But this seems to me to involve excessive suspicion of the natural sense of the narrative.

³² Thus with White, *Narration and Discourse*, 260; contra Pirson (*Lord of the Dreams*, 109), who thinks that neither Judah nor the brothers change.

of his father's grief for the first time,³³ and also hears the brothers telling of his (Joseph's) loss as a tragedy and cause of great distress.

The second thing that happens is that Judah commits himself to what he is declaring by offering himself as a slave in place of Benjamin, out of compassion for his father (44:33-34). This is now a complete contrast with the set of relationships at the beginning of the narrative. It was Judah's plan to sell Joseph to passing traders. Now Judah again speaks for all. His adoption of Jacob's perspective and his self-commitment in the project to save Benjamin convince that the speech is genuine. As "performative" speech, it even enters into the making of character.

For Hugh C. White (after Mikhail Bakhtin), "the final truth of the character can only be given by him in the form of 'a confessional self-utterance.'" ³⁴ And again: "Character here is not a spiritual essence, but a function of action and performative speech." ³⁵ And it brings about at last the turning point in the narrative. ³⁶

In immediate consequence of Judah's self-disclosure in speech, Joseph follows suit, with words that unmistakably utter the man: "I am Joseph!" and "Is my father still alive?" (45:3). This produces a long silence from the brothers (till 45:15), during which they are presumably "reviewing the situation"! Joseph now talks—as himself. In his explanation of God's purpose in their story, even in the evil actions with which it began, all their questions about their security and very existence are answered (45:4-13). There will be life for the family of Jacob—and, moreover, a life of peace and mutuality in place of that which had been knotted in murder, envy, and grief. Then there are emotional gestures of reconciliation, and finally "after that, the brothers talked with him" (45:15).

IV. Forgiveness: Private and Public

I have so far been considering Joseph in his family relationships. But it is not accidental that in the actions that I have been examining Joseph not only is son and brother but is also wielding power in Egypt. His accession to great power does not just serve the interests of irony and poetic justice or prompt thoughts about the oddness of "fate"; his accession is inextricably part of the substance of the story. Indeed, it is not possible to separate his actions into personal and political; for it is the famine that has produced the public need in "all the nations" as well as in the family back home, and his actions toward the brothers are at the

³³ Cf. Pirson, *Lord of the Dreams*, 106: "Judah quoting Jacob's words is the first time Joseph hears anything of what his father seems to know and think about him."

³⁴ White, *Narration and Discourse*, 80, 83-88. For him, the dialogue is the essence; characters are formed in the creative act.

³⁵ White (*Narration and Discourse*, 266) notes that Judah's speech is not always taken as authentic, but he counters by saying, "a commitment is always, to some extent, a free act," and "commitments made are effective determinants of character so long as there are no mental reservations which make them, in Austen's terms, 'infelicitous.'"

³⁶ Sternberg (*Poetics*, 308) finds an Aristotelian "peripety" at this point.

same time part of his duties as a high official. Joseph is in one respect an example of the “wise person,” like Ahiqar and the biblical Daniel, the individual who rises to power because of his outstanding wisdom and personal qualities.³⁷

The narrative of Joseph’s rise to prominence in Egypt portrays him as a model of right human authority. It is Joseph as dream interpreter who sets the standard for it when he advises Pharaoh to select a man “who is discerning and wise” (אִישׁ נָכוֹן וְחָכָם, 41:33) to manage the crisis in Egypt, a qualification that Pharaoh then finds in Joseph himself, with the addition that there is no one else like him, “one in whom is the spirit of God” (41:37-38). So there is more here than just a backcloth for the settling of a private affair. Joseph’s wielding of power also belongs to the subject matter.

The narrative therefore picks up a theme that has been present throughout Genesis, namely, “rule” as a function of human beings, the commission given to the man and the woman at creation as “image of God” (Gen 1:28, “have dominion” [כִּבְשׁ, רָדָה]). Joseph is “the man, the lord of the land” (הָאִישׁ אֲדֹנֵי הָאָרֶץ, 42:30). The “spirit of God” in Joseph gives a further hint of this connection (רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים, 41:38; cf. 1:2). Egypt becomes a kind of Eden; “the land” (of Egypt) is also “the earth” (הָאָרֶץ). Egypt has become the place in which life-and-death issues for the whole world are played out. People from “all the earth” (כָּל-הָאָרֶץ) come to Joseph and Egypt for food because the famine is universal (41:57; cf. 41:54, כָּל-הָאָרֶץ). In his wise rule, Joseph fulfills the Adamic mandate to enable the earth to be fruitful for the benefit of its inhabitants: “the earth [הָאָרֶץ] produced in large quantities” (41:47), reminding readers of the earth as productive agent in 1:11-12. The conflict with the brothers is even involved in this, as a kind of repudiation of the fratricide of Cain. The resumption of these themes from the beginning of Genesis counsels against confining the meaning of the story of Jacob’s family to the private or even familial realm.

What, then, is the relation between Joseph’s inner life and decisions and his public role? I have argued here against a disjunction between private agenda and public policy. The presentation of Joseph in chap. 41 as an “ideal administrator” (to return to Coats’s term) has not precluded the inner conflict that we have observed, and this has put in question the portrayal of Joseph as an ideal exemplar of the public official from chap. 41. That portrayal, it seems to me, is put on hold in chaps. 42–45 and is firmly established there only as Joseph masters himself.³⁸

³⁷ For Ahiqar, see the translation with notes by J. M. Lindenberger in *OTP* 2:479-507.

³⁸ Kenneth Cragg has made a striking application of the Joseph story to the modern political conflict in Israel-Palestine, arguing that the figure of Joseph, in both the OT and the Qur’an, offers a counterexample to the way of vengeance, and showing a relationship between inner rage and violent acts in the public sphere (*The Iron in the Soul: Joseph and the Undoing of Violence* [London: Melisende, 2009]). Cragg’s reading of the Joseph story issues in a close, necessary connection between the historical conflict and the discovery of authentic selfhood. For those contemplating revenge, there is something in the memory that knows a better way. See also John Kaltner, *Inquir-*

Indeed, the inner lives of the characters form an inseparable part of the story's thematic development. In the conclusion to the narrative, this is precisely in view. The brothers are anxious that Joseph's actions may conceal and belie his true intentions toward them. Though Joseph has visibly acted for their good, and they have been brought to a place of flourishing in the land of Egypt, they still fear that there is some other account that remains unsettled. Their language is that of interiority; they speak of "hatred" and "forgiveness" (50:15-17). In his response, Joseph too appeals to intention: "You meant evil against me" (50:20), using the verb חשבתם ("think, intend"), which designates the plans devised by the heart. God, in contrast, meant it (חשבה) for good (לטובה), and so the story is crystallized as a conflict between opposite intentions. The point should be stressed, because it means that the conclusion of the Joseph narrative echoes a fundamental tension in Genesis between what is depicted as the capacity of the human heart for intending evil (6:5) and God's vision of the world at creation as "good" (טוב, 1:31). Joseph's evocation of the creation mandate to "rule" thus tends necessarily toward the resolution of this tension.

Joseph finally reassures the brothers with the authoritative words: "Do not fear," and in so doing he "comforted" them (וינחם) and "spoke to their hearts" (50:21). Joseph knows that the condition of well-being that has been brought about by the settling of the united family in Goshen requires in addition this reassurance that comes from the ability to believe in the good intentions of another. The integrity of Joseph, that is, the unity of his intentions and actions, is essential to this final picture. Jacob's disjunction between his good and useful actions and his harboring of vengeful thoughts is hard to square with it.

In Genesis 50, the narrative comes to a new kind of closure, beyond that of chap. 45. I question the view, therefore, of those who think that at the first point of resolution of the story (in chap. 45) "Joseph has not changed," noting that the brothers' fears do not end there.³⁹ Josipovici denies any "fairy-tale" resolution; Joseph has no ultimate insight; his dreams are starkly opposed to reality.⁴⁰ It is true that after chap. 45, there is an issue still to be resolved, but this is what now happens in chap. 50. Furthermore, Joseph precisely plays the part of the one who has all the necessary insight. If we as readers have sought to understand the intentions of Joseph, we encounter finally a Joseph who understands the minds not only of the other human characters, but also of God. When he asks rhetorically, "Am I in the place of God?" (50:19), he means of course that he is not. Yet in a sense he is. The command "Do not fear" is, theologically speaking, a dominical one (Deut 1:21; Rev 1:17). And the "comforting" (Gen 50:21) is reminiscent of

ing of Joseph: Getting to Know a Biblical Character through the Qur'an (Interfaces; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003).

³⁹ For Coats, see n. 14 above, and compare Gabriel Josipovici, *The Book of God: A Response to the Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988) 84.

⁴⁰ Josipovici, *Book of God*, 75-82.

the call of Yhwh that the people should be “comforted” (Isa 40:1). Joseph has played his part in a measure of restitution of the divine vision of the “good.”

V. Conclusion.

Does Joseph, therefore, manifest this wisdom and noble purpose throughout the narrative? This question is admittedly harder to answer. The gaps in the story, especially in the three days of the brothers’ incarceration, suggest that the concept of a Joseph who has foreseen the course of events and his part in it from the outset is unsustainable. For Jacobs, as we saw, Joseph’s inconsistency simply exemplified the capacity of human beings to perform both good and bad acts. It is better, however, to think of a Joseph who is learning a kind of wisdom and insight more profound than the interpretation of dreams. The certainties of the dream interpreter are in contrast to the hesitation of the responsible man, as he handles a hard situation in which not only public affairs are in play but his own deepest being. What we see in him, I think, is wisdom in the making.⁴¹ His actions toward his brothers are a procrastination that gives time for change not only to his brothers but also to himself. And as we have seen, it is a wisdom that embraces all dimensions of human being, including the individual’s emotions, private relationships, and the bearing of public responsibility. Joseph’s reconciliation with his brothers is inseparable from his capacity to rule well in Egypt.

There is inevitably something imperfect and unfinished about such wisdom, since action in the real world can never quite escape ambivalence.⁴² Even so, in the life of Joseph, wisdom comes by way of the unreserved commitment of the self to doing good, involving perhaps personal cost and anguish. If Joseph can finally forgive, it has been at cost to himself. The idea that he tests only his brothers is inadequate at this point.⁴³ The reader, finally, is drawn by the imagination into the struggle of Joseph to find wisdom in a profound sense and so becomes involved in Joseph’s journey of perception and growth. If the story teaches “wisdom,” it is by way of this exacting vocation to insight and the conquest of damaging passions.

⁴¹ Fischer (“Josefsgeschichte,” 264-64) also recognizes the crucial part played in the story by the passage of time, in which the possibility of genuine change and thus reconciliation can develop.

⁴² Joseph’s consolidation of the whole land in the possession of Pharaoh, together with his enslavement of the Egyptian people as a by-product of his strategy for feeding them, is a case in point (Gen 47:20-26), both in itself and in its disturbing foreshadowing of the enslavement of the descendants of Jacob by another Pharaoh, who had not known Joseph (Exodus 1).

⁴³ Thomas Mann’s Joseph is on target here (*Joseph and His Brothers*, 1051): “‘what a young peacock I was in those days, a regular young cock of the walk, full of really vicious vanity and self-importance. It is a shame how long some people take to grow up. Even supposing I am grown up even now. Perhaps it takes you your whole life to grow up.’”

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