

**The Lure of Uncertainty:
Promise as Narrative Method in the Joseph Story**

by

© Lynne Carol Martin

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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LYNNE CAROL MARTIN

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To Yahweh, the God of process,
the "I Will Be Who I Will Be"

in gratitude for promises kept
and those awaiting fulfillment.

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Abstract

An important Old Testament theme is God's giving and fulfilling of promises to unlikely individuals. These promises usually contain three elements: land, progeny, and divine-human relationship, with the fulfillment of each element functioning as the impetus for narrative. But the story of Joseph in Egypt differs from the other promise stories in Genesis because Joseph seems not to receive any direct revelation from God, though he does receive promises in various forms from other, sometimes ambiguous, sources. How the theme of divine promise and fulfillment applies to his story is the central question of this thesis.

Chapter I examines thematic and structural links between the story's opening section (Gen. 37), in which Joseph travels through Canaan into Egypt, and Abraham's journey to the Promised Land. Because Joseph's journey is a reversal of Abraham's, Gen. 37 casts doubt on both the land element of God's promise and Joseph's role as heir to that promise.

The interpolated story of Tamar and Judah in Gen. 38--the subject of Chapter II--picks up the progeny element while prolonging our suspense. Yet because of Tamar's happy outcome we are indirectly reassured that Joseph's fate eventually will be positive. Furthermore, Tamar's story is linked to Joseph's on the text's formal level, introducing motifs which will continue to operate throughout the rest of Genesis.

Structural parallels between the stories of Joseph and Tamar are further explored in Chapter III, which focusses on Gen. 39-41. Joseph moves from house to house and from father to father, paradoxically moving closer to his "happy ending" even while he faces

ever-increasing danger. The image of the house is shown to be part of a complex spatial symbolism including pits, prisons, and Egypt in both its negative and positive aspects as Sheol (the Abode of the Dead), and as the land where life is preserved. For Joseph, Egypt has become the land of promise, because he is favoured by God. Joseph's changes of clothing complement this image pattern, and are also discussed here.

Chapter IV returns us to Canaan for a study of how the rest of Joseph's family comes to meet him in Egypt (Gen. 42-47:28). The focus of this section is the promise of progeny, since the problem faced by the family is survival. Try as he may, Jacob (Joseph's father) simply is not permitted to safeguard this element of God's promise to him, and his failure is revealed through the various financial transactions presented in the story.

Perhaps the most important connecting thread in Joseph's story is the recurrence of dreams, which function as promises to the dreamers and to anyone else affected by them (including the reader). Chapter V explores how three pairs of dreams help to establish Joseph's role as God's chosen, while the fourth dream provides the only instance in which God directly intervenes: he confirms the rightness of Jacob's journey to Egypt by reminding Jacob that God is still in relationship to him.

The Epilogue of the thesis describes how the story ends, and yet does not end. All the story's promises have been fulfilled but one: Jacob has not been brought up from Egypt as God said he would. In Gen. 47:29-50:26 both Jacob and Joseph return to Canaan, but Joseph's return is only temporary, for he dies in Egypt. However, he exacts a promise from his family to carry his remains to Canaan sometime in the future, thereby propelling us into the Exodus story with another unfulfilled promise while bringing Joseph's original journey full circle.

Introduction--The Promise of Story

"If you hated it, why'd you read it, Jillys?" John Wolf asked her.
"Same reason I read anythin' for," Jillys said. "To find out what happens."

John Irving, The World According to Garp

The Old Testament story of Joseph in Egypt (Genesis 37-50) begins with a gift of clothing and a pair of dreams--promises from two different sources that Joseph's importance will eclipse that of his older brothers. These and other promises function on the levels of both plot and text, or, to use structuralist terminology, story and discourse,¹ not only to influence the characters, but also to engage us in the act of reading. As soon as the promises appear we sense a multiplication of possibilities: will the promises be fulfilled, and if so, how? If they are not fulfilled, why and how aren't they, and what are we to think of the promise-makers? We continue reading for the same reason Jillys Sloper reads--"to find out what happens."

Any good story begins by setting up certain expectations, and the pleasure we derive from reading it depends on how cleverly these expectations are frustrated or met. Thus, a story makes a kind of promise to its readers simply by presenting an unresolved problem, for we immediately anticipate an eventual resolution. As Frank Kermode puts it, ". . . we are programmed to prefer fulfillment to disappointment, the closed to the open. . . . we are in love with the idea of fulfillment, and our interpretations show it."²

What interests us in this particular story is the way in which our expectations hinge on the outcome of promises made to the characters within the narrative. Hugh C. White's explanation of how promises work applies to both reader and characters as we experience the delay of fulfillment:

The promise is a word which has been explicitly separated from its referent. The promisor offers a word in place of a thing which will be supplied at a future time. This separation of the word from its referent injects an element of uncertainty into the relation of the signifier to the signified. When a man promises to bring me apples, I know what I think apples are . . . , but I will not know what he thinks they are until he produces them. A word which is included in a promise is thus returned hypothetically to a zero state of significance and is restored to significance as an instrument of communication (between the two parties) only by the fulfillment of the promise.

Thus we participate in the story, for characters and readers alike are lured from one promise to the next, encountering false hopes and real failures, and, on various levels, receiving just enough encouragement to keep us all going. In delay is the stuff of story.

Furthermore, what happens to Joseph and his brothers springs not only from promises given to them within the confines of Genesis 37-50, but also from promises given to their forefathers in Genesis 12-36. And just when we think all has been settled at the story's end, Joseph himself makes promises which set in motion the subsequent story of the Exodus. Once we allow these other stories to heighten our expectations, our pleasure is enhanced; simultaneously, Joseph's story becomes much more profound. Thus, the fulfilling (or non-fulfilling) of promise functions as a controlling narrative strategy: setting the plot in motion, revealing yet obscuring the story's outcome, and subtly ringing changes on concerns that are central to the larger corpus, the Pentateuch, in which it lies.

Joseph's story itself divides easily into four sections: Joseph in Canaan, Joseph in Egypt, Jacob and his other sons moving from Canaan to Egypt, and finally the deaths of Jacob and Joseph. Spliced between the first two sections is the strange and humorous tale of Judah and

Tamar, which thematically and structurally foreshadows the outcome of Joseph's story while also establishing Judah as a key player. Each of these sections deals obliquely with what David J.A. Clines calls "the theme of the Pentateuch": "the partial fulfillment--which implies also the partial non-fulfillment--of the promise to or blessing of the patriarchs."⁴ Clines identifies three elements of this promise, made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob by God: posterity (or progeny), a special relationship between God and the recipient, and a specific geographical homeland. All three elements come into play throughout Joseph's story, represented by different plot patterns and motifs, which, though they are not rigidly confined, tend to correspond more or less to the first three of Joseph's sections while converging in the fourth.

In the opening section (Gen. 37), these three elements with their patterns of imagery are introduced, but the promise of land is given special consideration as first Joseph moves from one end of Canaan to the other and beyond, and then Jacob threatens to follow him. Section II (Gen. 39-41) continues to explore the land question, but also develops the element of divine-human relationship, reflected in Joseph's gain and loss of various garments and in an extended wordplay linking his places of abode. By reintroducing the rest of Jacob's family as being preoccupied with buying food, section III (Gen. 42-47:28) turns our attention to the promise of progeny while not forgetting the other two promise elements. Since Judah reappears in section III, it should not be surprising that the story of Judah and Tamar in Gen. 38 looks forward to the concerns of section III by centering on the progeny question. In chapters 1, 3, and 4, we will examine each of these narrative patterns as they appear in the story's

first three sections, while in chapter 2 we will study the links between Gen. 38 and Joseph's story. We will conclude by looking at ambiguous fulfillments within the story's fourth section, the epilogue.

But the thread which ties all three sections and epilogue together is the pattern of dreams, the subject of chapter 5. There are three pairs of dreams, plus one, whose presentations raise questions about the nature of promise itself. These dreams are responsible for setting up and fulfilling our main expectations; by telling us what will happen, they heighten both our anticipation and, paradoxically, our doubts. Joseph's dreams in Genesis 37 provide the impetus for the rest of the plot, but they also serve as the story's most attractive enigma through a sophisticated narrative technique which keeps us completely in the dark regarding their trustworthiness. However, as others dream and have their dreams interpreted, the certainty of the first pair, hidden at first, is gradually teased into view. The process is captivating, the message indelible: just as the story's promises to the reader are made good in stunningly unexpected ways, so too God's promises to his people will be fulfilled despite seemingly impossible circumstances.

A word about method: my study will focus on narrative rather than theology, treating God as a character within the context of the Pentateuchal stories. However, from time to time I will make statements that sound theological, such as the one concluding the above paragraph. Any good story has at its core a certain world view which informs both its technique and its content; Joseph's story assumes that Yahweh God is sovereign, personal, and impossible to second-guess.

This frame of reference must be acknowledged in any literary treatment of the Pentateuch, just as, for example, the metaphor of the "Under Toad" becomes central in any reading of John Irving's The World According to Garp (NY: Pocket Books, 1978).

I will treat Joseph's story as it appears in English in the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, but where the English qualitatively differs from the Hebrew, I will follow the Hebrew. At times I will explore the importance of Hebrew terms (such as Sheol and a cluster of related words for pit and prison), but because such information is widely accessible it seemed legitimate to incorporate into my twentieth-century North American interpretation.

I am assuming the story has narrative coherence. The task of identifying sources for its different strands is one of biblical scholarship (and many biblical scholars these days are turning towards synchronic rather than diachronic readings⁵). Having said this, I would add that a reading such as mine would not be possible without the meticulous attention to historical detail practiced by biblical scholars in the last one hundred years or so. To understand Tamar's righteousness, for example, it is crucial to know something about marriage laws in the Ancient Near East. To enjoy the word play between pit and prison in Joseph's story, it is necessary to know that pits in Canaan were usually round, and that the word translated prison literally means "round-house."

Furthermore, I acknowledge that Joseph's story, like the rest of the Bible, is probably constructed from various sources which existed independently and for very different reasons before being brought together into one narrative.⁶ However, brought together they were,

and, I submit, for good and discoverable purposes. Though the seams may occasionally show, the story's bits and pieces were selected and aligned because someone (or someones) thought the arrangement made sense. I would argue that this sense is aesthetic as well as political and theological. I do not intend to supercede traditional biblical scholarship with my reading, since I come to the text with a different set of questions (the cliché about comparing apples and oranges has some application here). Rather than asking historical-critical questions, I prefer, as a writer, to ask how this story works as it now stands. (A friend recently asked what I have learned from my study of Genesis 37-50; my reply was that I have learned, at least theoretically, how to write a story.)

Though my background reading began with structuralism, including works by Tzvetan Todorov, Robert Polzin, and others, my approach has broadened to include some principles of reader-response theory, especially Wolfgang Iser's notion of "gaps of indeterminacy".⁷ I am most indebted, however, to the work of Robert Alter, whose Art of Biblical Narrative, in particular, sowed many seeds which, I trust, have blossomed here.⁸ His contention that the Bible's so-called "textual problems" reveal not a clumsy aesthetic but one different from our own confirmed many of my intuitions and gave me the confidence to pursue this line of inquiry.

Chapter I--Life With(out) Father
Or, Who Was That Masked Man?

Since so much of the Pentateuch centres on the vital importance of the land promised by God, it should not be surprising to discover that geography plays a major role in the story of Jacob's favourite son Joseph. The story's opening section, Genesis 37, places Joseph in the context of other recipients of God's promise, not through direct statement, but through the use of narrative signposts and literary conventions, which in turn make promises to the reader because of the expectations they raise. Verses 1 and 2 carefully set the story "in the land of Canaan" through statements which subtly allude to the past as well as the ongoing "history of the family of Jacob." Then as Joseph travels through Canaan, the place names marking his route point to earlier events in which questions have arisen concerning God's promise to Abraham. Along the way, Joseph's conversation with a mysterious stranger suggests an ambiguous comparison between this encounter and others in which the stranger is God. Furthermore, Joseph's journey ultimately takes him out of Canaan and into Egypt--the symbolic antithesis of the land of promise.

What are we to make of these patterns? Are we to compare or contrast Joseph to Abraham as a recipient of the divine promise? Does Joseph's destiny rest in God's hands, or does the stranger's stubborn anonymity mock any attempt to link him with God? Is Joseph's exile from his father's household an irrevocable fall from favour, or is it a necessary preliminary to the fulfillment of his (and our) hopes?

The story begins with two statements which seem simple enough: "Jacob dwelt in the land of his father's sojournings, in the land of Canaan. This is the history of the family of Jacob" (Gen. 37:1-2;

hereafter all passages cited are from Genesis unless otherwise indicated). The first statement, asserting Jacob's dwelling in the land, resolves his problem in the previous story of having to seek refuge outside Canaan to escape his brother Esau's wrath. Jacob and Esau have been reconciled, and so Jacob is free to live in Canaan once again.¹ Ostensibly, God's promise of land to Abraham's posterity has been at least partially fulfilled.

But this statement also introduces several pertinent issues for the "history of the family of Jacob" identified in verse two. It does not say that Jacob dwelt in the land of his youth, which we might expect of a conclusion to the story of his homecoming. Rather, it refers to "the land of his father's sojournings." Already we are given a clue that this "history" may not be as straightforward as it may appear, for Isaac, Jacob's father, lived in Canaan all his life in obedience to instructions from both Abraham and God (24:8 & 26:2), even though famine threatened to drive him into Egypt. In contrast, "the history of the family of Jacob" will describe the movement of Jacob's sons and finally Jacob himself from Canaan to Egypt because of famine, a move which throws into doubt God's promise to give Canaan to Jacob and his descendants (35:12).² Ironically, Jacob will merely sojourn in the land in which his father dwelt.

How does this reversal come about? Chapter 37 sets the scene by naming Joseph; the history of Jacob's family immediately focuses on Jacob's eleventh son, whose first described act, still in v. 2, is to tattle on his older brothers (the narrative does not say whether the "ill report" is warranted). Then we learn that Joseph is Jacob's favourite son, a fact echoed by the narrative's naming of Joseph only,

while his brothers are merely "sons of . . . his father's wives" (v.2), "other of [Jacob's] children" (v.3), and Joseph's "brothers" (v.4). Clearly, the only one who counts for Jacob is Joseph, and Jacob shows his favouritism by giving Joseph a special gift (37:4).³ When Joseph dreams that both his parents and his brothers will bow down to him (37:5-11), we can easily interpret the dreams as commentary on Joseph's present situation, even though as a dutiful son he would be expected to serve his father much as a servant would do.⁴ However, besides describing Joseph's life as Jacob's favourite son, these last two events, functioning as promises to Joseph, provide impetus for the story whose actual movement begins with Joseph's journey, described in vv. 12-17.

To understand the function of the journey, it is useful to apply Tzvetan Todorov's theory of narrative grammar to the opening of Joseph's story. According to Todorov,

there are two types of episodes in a narrative: those which describe a state (of equilibrium or of disequilibrium) and those which describe the passage from one state to the other. The first type will be relatively static and, one might say, iterative; the same kind of actions can be repeated indefinitely. The second, on the other hand, will be dynamic and in principle occurs only once.⁵

Joseph's spying, his gift, and his dreams describe the state of disequilibrium existing in Jacob's family, for though these incidents put increasing pressure on the family's relationships, theoretically they could be repeated indefinitely, one way or another. Here the promise of the story first appears as a state of unresolved conflict within the family; we expect this story to tell us how the relationships will be sorted out. Joseph's journey occasions a drastic change in the family's routine, and thus sets in motion "the passage

"from one state to the other." The new state achieved at the end of chapter 37 is also one of disequilibrium, for the promises introduced by the dreams and the gift, as well as those alluded to by Joseph's journey, are left completely unfulfilled.

The narrative states that Joseph leaves his father at Hebron to seek his brothers at Shechem. This specific mention of Hebron and Shechem connects Joseph's story to Abraham's, for these are places in which God has announced the parameters of his promise (12:5-7; 15:1; 18:1-10). Joseph's route from Hebron to Shechem reminds us of Abraham's journey from Mesopotamia to Shechem to Hebron in 12:1-13:18, a journey which "dramatises the ambiguities inherent in the promise [given to Abraham], and the resulting difficulties in discerning and obtaining the divine blessing."⁶ Though Joseph's journey is much more direct, the account of it in 37:12-17 plays on the reader's knowledge of Abraham's journey, as it relates to God's promise, in several important ways.

First, Abraham's journey from Haran to Shechem begins as a response to God's directive: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you" (12:1). In contrast, Joseph's journey to Shechem begins when his father commissions him to report on the welfare of his brothers and to protect Jacob's financial interests (37:14). Despite having received God's promise himself (35:9-12), Jacob now tries to "play God" by taking matters into his own hands and attempting to protect his God-given progeny in his own way. However, in moving from Shechem to Dothan, Joseph passes out of range of his father's protection and into the hands of his jealous brothers. Certainly the story offers no

suggestion yet that God controls Joseph's destiny, but only a wry example of Jacob's inability to do so. Furthermore, though Abraham moves into the land of promise from beyond its boundaries, Joseph reverses that direction, travelling back toward Haran before being whisked southward into Egypt. Like Abraham, Joseph will end up far from his country, kindred, and father's house, though his ultimate destination is neither Mesopotamia nor the land of promise, but Canaan's symbolic opposite (cf. DeRoche, 72, 74).

Secondly, Abraham's journey takes him from Canaan into Egypt because of severe famine (12:10). Since we have already made an ironic connection between the story's opening sentence and Isaac's response to famine, we are given a clue that famine may become a factor in this story as well. We remember that Isaac remained in Canaan, despite the famine, because he was obedient to God's instructions (26:2), but Abraham went to Egypt on his own initiative and tried to protect himself there by allowing Pharaoh to take his wife (12:10-20). Thus we are given a subtle hint that self-protection, insofar as it undermines trust in God, may become an issue in Joseph's story, especially since what happens at Dothan bears witness to Jacob's failure to protect his favourite son, who himself has been sent to protect the family.

But if this story is about trusting God to keep his promises, where is he? So far, these oblique reminders that God has been present in the lives of Joseph's ancestors do nothing more than highlight God's conspicuous absence to Joseph. Rather than responding to words from God at Hebron and Shechem, Joseph sets out for Shechem according to Jacob's unwise directive, and once there he goes to Dothan on the strength of ambiguous guidance from a stranger (37:15-17). Who is this

man, and what is he doing in this narrative? The plot does not require such a character; Joseph could just as well find his brothers at Shechem. Or, to preserve the suggestion that Joseph must move beyond the realm of his father's influence, Joseph himself could decide to search the area north of Shechem, a narrative strategy which would also preserve the parallel with Abraham's journey.⁷

Joseph's meeting with the man at Shechem makes much more sense when we read it in the context of similar meetings taking place at crucial junctures in the patriarchal narratives. Just as Joseph's journey both reflects and subverts Abraham's journey, so Joseph's meeting participates in and deviates from the larger set of meeting episodes. Unlike the journeys, whose similarities are allusive rather than structural, the meetings depend on four elements which hardly vary from one instance to the next and which always occur in the same order, constituting a pattern I will call "the encounter with the omniscient questioner." To see how it works, let us study four versions of it which appear earlier in Genesis and thus pre-condition its use in Joseph's story.⁸

Typically, the encounter begins with a "where" question asked of the hero. The identity of the questioner may be revealed at the outset, as is the case with Adam and Cain, whom God asks, respectively, "Where are you?" (3:9), and, "Where is Abel your brother?" (4:9). Or the questioner's identity may be ambiguous, as with Abraham, to whom God appears in the guise of one of three men (Gen. 18). In this instance, Abraham enacts an elaborate hospitality ritual to welcome the three men before they pose the question, "Where is Sarah your wife?" (18:9). However, the question asked of Jacob by the man who wrestles

with him at the Jabbok is not a "where" question, because the pattern has been modified to suit the particular purpose of this encounter: the renaming of Jacob confirms that Jacob's many struggles are about to end, at least for the time being. Thus, the question is not, "Where are you?" but, "What is your name?" (32:27).

In each case the question serves to remind the hero of a significant relationship. Adam must declare his whereabouts both literally and figuratively in relation to God; Cain must explain his brother's absence; Abraham is obliquely reminded that his joining with Sarah (not Hagar) is the means by which God's promise of descendants will be fulfilled. (Since Abraham risks losing Sarah both before and after this encounter [12:10-20 & 20:1-18] the question of where she is carries more urgency and irony than might first appear.) Again, the question put to Jacob is not intended to extract information; after all, the questioner already seems to know everything about the hero. Rather, Jacob is being asked to articulate his identity up to this point in his story. He is the One-Who-Supplants, the "Heelgrabber" (Alter, Art, 55), a name which defines him in terms of a competitive relationship. Appropriately, Jacob's questioner is a wrestler who reveals that Jacob has successfully struggled not only against human enemies but against God himself, and is thus worthy to be renamed "He who strives with God" (32:28). His competitive nature, however, is not given wholehearted divine approval, for Jacob comes away from the encounter with a limp which attests to the consequences of his stubborn pride. (We have seen evidence of this trait in Jacob's attempt to manage his family in Gen. 37; it will continue as an important theme throughout Joseph's story.)

Just as Jacob's wrestling match ushers in a new phase in his relationships with God and Esau, so too Adam, Cain, and Abraham face similar changes, which, for good or bad, fulfill earlier promises. For Adam and Cain, these promises have been presented negatively, as warnings (2:17; 4:7), and their fulfillment comes in the form of curses (3:14-24; 4:11-16). Abraham, on the other hand, receives a partial fulfillment of God's earlier promise concerning descendants: within a definite time period Sarah will bear a son.⁹ And Jacob's encounter confirms God's promise to be with him and bring him back to Canaan, spoken on the eve of Jacob's flight into Mesopotamia to escape Esau's revenge (28:10-22).

In fact, Jacob's wrestling match in Gen. 32 provides narrative closure to his journey begun in Gen. 28, for it occurs on the eve of his homecoming after his long exile. This is the fourth characteristic of the encounter with the omniscient questioner: it either precipitates or concludes a life-changing journey. The encounter drives both Adam and Cain away from their homeland to which they can never return (3:22-24; 4:12-16), whereas Jacob's encounter signals his re-entry into the land promised by God. Abraham's encounter transforms his settled existence into that of the traveler once again, with Hebron now functioning as the point of departure.¹⁰

Let us now turn to Joseph's meeting with the man at Shechem to see how it makes use of the pattern just described. Here is the passage, arresting in its oddity:

And a man found him wandering in the fields; and the man asked him, "What are you seeking?" "I am seeking my brothers," he said, "tell me, I pray you, where they are pasturing the flock." And the man said, "They have gone away, for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers and found them at Dothan. (37:15-17)

Immediately apparent is the element of questioning, although the "where" has been shifted to Joseph's reply. As before, the question throws into sharp relief a crucial relationship, in this case between Joseph and his brothers. Furthermore, by emphasizing the brothers' absence, this scene begs comparison with Cain's being questioned about his murdered brother Abel. Here is the Cain and Abel story reversed; Joseph, the soon-to-be victim, asks, "Where are my brothers?"

The stranger at Shechem initiates the conversation with a question that seems straightforward, until we take into account the four previous encounters. In the versions involving Adam, Cain, Abraham, and Jacob, the questioner already knows the answers. The man at Shechem also seems possessed of superior knowledge, for when Joseph asks about his brothers, the man knows exactly who they are. Thus his question, "What are you seeking?" contains a multitude of nuances. In light of what we know about Joseph's family, we hear hints of questions like, "Are you hoping to catch them at something naughty again?" or, "What are you really after, and will you know what to do if you get it?"

And consider the stranger's non-answer to Joseph's request (reminiscent of the wrestler's refusal to divulge his name to Jacob in 32:29). The man does not say, "They have gone to Dothan," but rather, "they have gone away"--a fact surely obvious even to the naive Joseph. The only firm help the man will offer is his comment that he "heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" This is a deliberate non-promise, in direct contrast to the promises (or warnings) which come at least to partial fulfillment in the four other versions. And yet, strangely, it proves to be more of a promise than Jacob's earlier assertion that he

would send Joseph to his brothers at Shechem. In fact, the stranger's words are the only ones borne out in Gen. 37, and they are proven trustworthy immediately after being spoken.

This passage, then, calls into question the whole notion of promise as it relates to Joseph. Whom is he to trust? Certainly not Jacob, for he is shown to be reluctant to place his full trust in God and foolish in his handling of family matters. By making Joseph his conspicuous favourite, Jacob unwittingly aggravates the animosity among his sons, and then he blithely sends Joseph into their murderous midst. It is no wonder that a person so unperceptive would not know his sons' true whereabouts. Throughout this "history of the family of Jacob" the patriarch will consistently be the last to know what is going on.

But not all the blame for Joseph's impending misfortune belongs to Jacob; indeed, Jacob's blindness paradoxically lets him off the hook at the same time it implicates him. Because the brothers are not where Jacob says they are, Joseph must make the choice either to return to Hebron or to keep looking. Certainly the stranger bears some responsibility, if only for prompting a further search; after all, Joseph does not find him nor initiate the conversation. Hence, the question, "What are you seeking?" can also imply the challenge, "Why are you waiting for permission to go on? Are you unable to act on your own initiative?" The man's strange comment seems almost taunting in this light, since it assures that Joseph will be unable to blame him if the brothers are not to be found at Dothan. (Indeed, the man's comment sardonically writes off the brothers' trustworthiness just by pointedly not assuming that they will go where they said they would.) But Joseph's decision to move on together with his earlier activities of

spying on his brothers and flaunting the promises of his special status implicate him as well. He too has a hand in making the bed in which his brothers will force him to lie.¹¹

What of God's role in all this? In the four other variations of the hero's encounter with a questioner, God is identified sooner or later as an active agent, but not in Joseph's case.¹² This is the most telling difference between Joseph and his counterparts, both in this pattern and in the journey motif. Joseph receives promises from various sources, directly and indirectly; significant parallels are drawn between him and his ancestral recipients of the divine promise, yet God is nowhere to be found in Gen. 37, the story's opening section (where readers' expectations are always intensely cultivated). The effect of God's absence is to undermine any hopes we might build on all these attractive promises, yet the promises themselves, precisely because of their multiplicity, temper our frustration and prevent us from giving up on the story.

The tension of our uncertainty is wound even tighter when we consider the fourth characteristic of the encounter with the omniscient questioner as it applies to Joseph's story. Joseph's journey ends when he finds his brothers at Dothan, yet this ending is only the beginning. Like Adam, Cain, and Abraham, Joseph is about to embark on a journey of far-reaching consequences. Jacob's commission has sent Joseph from one end of Canaan to the other, but the stranger's lead sends Joseph down from the high holy places, and the brothers send him into exile from the land of promise: at Dothan he is thrown into a pit (37:24), and then falls further when he is sold into slavery in Egypt (37:36).¹³

Thus, by the end of chapter 37, Jacob's family is totally fragmented, recalling Cain's broken relationships after his encounter with a questioner. Jacob is still in the valley of Hebron, Joseph is on his way to Egypt, and the brothers show signs of disunity. Reuben, who has tried earlier to disassociate himself from his brothers' scheming (37:21-22), is the first to move, returning alone to the pit (37:29-30). Then the brothers send evidence of Joseph's "death" to their father, rather than facing him directly with their alibi (37:32). Later when they attempt to rejoin him it is too late; Jacob has already distanced himself in his grief from everyone but Joseph: "Then Jacob rent his garments, and put sackcloth upon his loins, and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and said, 'No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning'" (37:34-35). Notice that his sons and daughters rise "up" while Jacob insists on going "down." (The Hebrew makes the contrast more marked, since v. 35 begins **וַיִּקְמוּ**, literally "And rose up [all his sons . . .]," to counterbalance Jacob's **כִּי-אֵרָד**, "that I will go down."¹⁴) Ironically, "all his sons" cannot possibly rise up to comfort him, because one son--his favourite, and the only one capable of offering comfort to Jacob--has gone down to Egypt. Before, Jacob and Joseph had stayed behind while the rest of the family had gone to Dothan; then Joseph's brothers spotted him from afar and planned his murder "before he came near to them" (37:18); now the rest of the family rises up while Jacob and Joseph descend, one metaphorically and the other literally.¹⁵

Not only is Joseph no longer present to receive the benefit of his father's promise of special relationship, he is also no longer able to

enjoy life in the land of promise. Furthermore, Jacob effectively blocks off the fulfillment of the progeny promise by alienating himself from the eleven sons left to him. Though various narrative details in Gen. 37 have suggested that Joseph may be the next recipient of the divine promise, the disintegration of Jacob's family, Joseph's disastrous journey, and God's stubborn absence seem to negate the three elements of progeny, land, and divine-human relationship. That Joseph will gain dominance over his older brothers--the promise inherent in his dreams and in Jacob's gift--seems downright impossible.

Chapter II--Life With Father-in-law,
Or, Promise Her Anything

Enter Tamar, a most audacious heroine, whose actions, like Joseph's second dream, strain almost to breaking the proper relationship between child and parent, and whose happy destiny suggests the possibility that Joseph may triumph as well. The tale of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38 was probably originally unrelated to the tales concerning Joseph, arising instead from a Canaanite trickster tale in which a mere woman outwits the self-important son of Israel.¹ Coming as it does immediately after Joseph has been sold to Midianite traders, this story has perplexed most biblical scholars, who can see no satisfactory reason for its placement.² However, a careful reading of both stories will reveal thematic links, especially concerning the giving and keeping of promises, which allow the Judah and Tamar story to function not only as a good story in itself, but also as a subtle preview to the outcome of Joseph's story. Furthermore, since both Judah and Tamar are preoccupied with the continuation of Judah's genetic line, their story comments on the unusual ways in which the divine promise of progeny is sometimes fulfilled.

Central to our understanding of promise in Judah and Tamar's story is what Tzvetan Todorov calls the "obligative will," "a coded, nonindividual will which constitutes the law of a society. For this reason, the obligative has a special status; the laws are always implied, never named (it is unnecessary), and risk passing unnoticed by the reader."³ The obligative will for Judah and Tamar involves the marriage laws of ancient Israel as they reflect the values of family survival; indirectly, the obligative will here contains the essence of God's promise of progeny.

At the beginning of Genesis 38, Judah has married, fathered sons, and selected Tamar as wife for Er his first-born (38:2-6). Unfortunately, Er dies before Tamar can get pregnant. According to Susan Niditch:

The Genesis narratives about the patriarchs and their wives reveal that, as in most tribal, patriarchal societies the young married woman's role is to bear children. . . . The identity of these women, their sociological existence in a sense, depends upon their bearing their husband's children. The young in-marrying woman who comes from a different clan and perhaps from a distant geographical location is integrated into her husband's clan through the children she bears him. . . . If the woman has not borne his children, however, she has never fully become a member of his family.⁴

The obligative will says that a married woman must not remain childless, and it provides an acceptable alternative through the institution of the Levirate--a childless widow was to marry her brother-in-law.⁵ Though the brother-in-law could reject his responsibility in a public ceremony which involved his disgrace, this option either was not available when Genesis 38 was composed, or was avoided to save Judah's second son Onan's reputation.

But Onan refuses to perform his Levirate duties. Instead, he surreptitiously spills his semen on the ground because he does not want to give offspring to his dead brother (38:9). This action is "displeasing in the sight of the Lord" (38:10), and God then kills Onan. Two conclusions can now be drawn concerning Tamar's situation:

- 1) The central problem to be solved is her childlessness.
- 2) The obligative will corresponds to God's will.

Todorov recognizes another type of motivating will common in narrative which he calls the "optative" (p. 114). This is the desire of an individual whose actions follow accordingly. An example is

Onan's refusal to provide offspring for his dead brother, or Judah's lust and subsequent intercourse with the "harlot." Judah's optative will functions as the main opposing force in Tamar's struggle to have children. In a "normal" Old Testament situation Judah's optative would win out over Tamar's because he has power over her as a man and as her father-in-law.

But Tamar indirectly has God on her side; her optative conforms to the obligative will (and the divine promise of progeny) in that she pursues the goal of perpetuating Judah's clan. Though she seemingly steps outside the limits of acceptability, her intention is completely orthodox. Judah, on the other hand, like his son Onan, is careful to present an image of respectability, disguising his rebellion against true propriety with smooth talk. For personal reasons he thwarts Tamar's/society's/God's desires. Ironically, his motive for refusing the social mechanism that would insure his clan's survival is his fear that his last remaining son would die. But this is precisely Jacob's problem in Genesis 42-43 when he refuses to send Benjamin with his brothers to buy food. Both Onan and Judah are chips off the old block, for all three are men whose faith clearly rests in their own powers of management rather than in the provisions and promises of their God.

Furthermore, the struggle between Judah and Tamar hinges on a set of promises they make to each other. The very institution of Levirate marriage promises that Tamar will not remain a childless widow, but the fulfillment of this unspoken promise is delayed by Judah's spoken promise to marry his third son to Tamar--when he grows up. If we accept Todorov's theory that narrative episodes describe either states or transformations between states (he calls these "adjectives" and

"verbs"⁶), then the obligative will of the Levirate provides the impetus for the story's movement in the same way that a promise compels action on the part of the promise-maker. Todorov's "ideal" narrative "begins with a stable situation which is disturbed by some power or force. There results a state of disequilibrium; by the action of a force directed in the opposite direction, the equilibrium is re-established; the second equilibrium is similar to the first, but the two are never identical" (p. 111). In this story, Judah's false promise belies his optative will, seeming to conform to the obligative will while actually countering it and thus delaying the re-establishment of equilibrium, which for Tamar is her re-integration into Judah's family.

Verses 1-6 introduce the initial situation and all the actors, setting the stage for the conflict which follows. Significantly, 38:1 continues the process of family fragmentation begun in Genesis 37. Not only has Reuben attempted to act independently of his brothers, but Judah now separates himself from the family: "It happened at that time that Judah went down from his brothers. . . ." The first section of Joseph's story has ended with Jacob's lament about going down to Sheol to mourn his son (37:35), followed immediately by the wry comment that the lost son has actually been sold into slavery in Egypt (37:36). Now we read that Judah goes down from his brothers, not as a result of, but as a prologue to losing his sons.

Robert Alter ("LA," 74) makes similar connections among Joseph's, Jacob's, and Judah's "going down" (Hebrew yard). He emphasizes the "oddness" of Judah's action; the phrase vayered me-et, meaning "he went down from," means more than "he parted from," especially since it

occurs in such close proximity to both Jacob's "extravagance" in his wish to go down to his son in Sheol, and the beginning of chapter 39, in which Joseph is "brought down" to Egypt with the identical Hebrew word-root (see also Ackerman, "JJJ," 106). Concerning Jacob's "self-dramatization" in mourning, Alter observes that Jacob's devised explanation for Joseph's disappearance is given in "formal verse, a neat semantic parallelism that scans with three beats in each hemistich." This "heightened speech," together with the narrative's piling up of "half-a-dozen different activities of mourning" on Jacob's part contrasts with Reuben's "sincere sense of bereavement" in 37:29, when Reuben tears his clothes--"in the Hebrew only two words and a particle." Alter's argument, in my mind, is clinched by his observation that "one can hardly dismiss all [Jacob's] gestures of mourning as standard Near Eastern practice, since the degree of specification and synonymity is far beyond the norms of the narrative itself" ("LA," 74). Though Jacob may be using a cliché to express his grief, the phrase "go down"--to Sheol or Egypt, or from brothers--works on the text's formal level as a metaphor of the alienation existing among the members of Jacob's family. Yet, the statement that even while he is mourned Joseph is not really lost (37:35-36, with no break in the Hebrew) has some bearing on the fate of both Jacob's and Judah's progeny. Judah's sons, like Jacob's, will be preserved, but not in ways their fathers envision.

Beginning with the initial state of equilibrium (Judah has three sons, Er, Onan, and Shelah, and looks forward to grandchildren), the following pattern summarizes the transformations of the story's first section:

(e.= equilibrium; d.= disequilibrium; adj = adjective)

- 38:6-7 e. state/adj: Tamar=Er's wife and Judah's daughter-in-law
disturbing force/verb: Er dies
d. state/adj: Tamar=childless widow
- 38:8 corrective force/verb: Judah sends Onan to perform Levirate
- 38:9-10 e. state/adj: Tamar=Onan's wife
disturbing force/verb: Onan rejects her and dies
d. state/adj: Tamar=childless widow
- 38:11 "corrective" force/ verb: Judah promises Shelah to Tamar.

At this point Judah ceases to abide by his social obligations. At the death of his first son, he correctly discharges his patriarchal duties by providing an appropriate substitute husband for Tamar. However, Onan's death gives Judah pause (v. 11): ". . . he has reason to fear for the life of his last remaining son, for in cases like this the ancients suspected that the wife herself was in some way responsible for the death (cf. Tobit 3:7ff.; 8:9ff.)" (von Rad, 358). It is significant that in this sparingly sketched story the narrator states unequivocally that both Er and Onan are completely to blame for their own deaths; Er is "wicked in the sight of the Lord" (v. 7), and Onan's action is "displeasing" (v. 10), as we have seen before. Presumably, however, Judah is not privy to this knowledge; therefore the death of his two sons must seem like the fearful workings of a mysterious destiny. If we read this story in light of its placement immediately after Judah's part in depriving Jacob of his son, we might wonder what effect the deaths of Er and Onan could play on Judah's guilty conscience. Yet his fear of Tamar indicates that Judah is not ready to acknowledge his own guilt.

Certainly the story standing alone requires Judah to suspect Tamar, but by juxtaposing this story with the sale of Joseph, the

larger narrative achieves an even more satisfying depth. Alter points out that the "striking contrast" between "Jacob's extravagant procedures of mourning over the imagined death of one son" and Judah's "complete silence" after "the actual death in quick sequence of two sons" not only "underscores Jacob's excesses, it surely also makes us wonder whether there is a real lack of responsiveness in Judah, and thus indicates how parallel acts or situations are used to comment on each other in biblical narrative" ("LA," 75).

But Judah's silence may also indicate how deeply his grief is felt. His false promise to marry his third son to Tamar is an attempt to preserve the boy's life, even at the risk of violating social convention. Perhaps his earlier plot to sell Joseph contains an ambiguous element of sympathetic feeling, since after all Judah did convince his brothers not to kill the lad. However, Judah is too careful to conform outwardly to social convention: read in light of his legally correct instructions to Tamar (38:11) and his later reluctance to become a laughing-stock (39:23), his argument on Joseph's behalf--"let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother" (37:27)--seems more like calculated piety than real sympathy. When Judah hears of Tamar's pregnancy in 38:24, he shows no mercy: "Bring her out and let her be burned." Indeed, says Alter, "the naked unreflective brutality of Judah's response . . . is even stronger in the original, where the synthetic character of biblical Hebrew reduces his deadly instructions to two words: hotziuha vetisaref" ("LA," 76). (This ruthless quality will be softened by the time Judah pleads sincerely for Benjamin to be preserved in 44:18-34; indeed, it has been argued that Tamar's triumph over Judah is the key factor in Judah's character development.⁷)

Ironically, Judah's attempt to get rid of Joseph actually preserves him, while his attempt at clan preservation will lead to the near-deaths of his heirs. Judah, though pretending to solve Tamar's problem, actually prolongs it by sending Tamar back to her father's house⁸--an ironic inversion of Joseph's exile from his father's house at the end of Gen. 37, a solution of family conflict which was also intended to be permanent, and which depended on a lie. (The significance of house as a motif in Joseph's story will be explored in the following chapter.) In fact, Judah's "solution" merely leaves Tamar in the same state of disequilibrium she experienced before Judah's intervention.

"In the course of time," we are told, Judah's wife dies, a fact which seems to act as a catalyst, not only adding fuel to Tamar's smouldering frustration but also curtailing the possibility that Judah will father more sons. This is a totally unacceptable scenario: Tamar is single and childless, Judah is single with only one son, and that son Shelah (now grown up) is either still single or, less likely, married to someone else (38:14). Von Rad says that Judah himself was not exempt from Levirate duties; "therefore Tamar can well have reckoned with Judah's taking her in marriage" (p. 359). Surely now would be the opportune time to call her back from her father's house. But no, Judah shows no such intention; rather he goes up to Timnah to enjoy the annual sheepshearing (38:12). This move marks a shift in the narrative structure; up to now Judah has been the hypocritical problem-solver, making promises that remain unkept. Here Tamar takes matters into her own hands, devising a complicated means by which Judah's optative will can be brought to heel with the obligative,

thereby forcing the fulfillment of his (and God's) promise.

The patterns of transformation in the story's climax are closely related to the recurring structure in part one, which can be formulated as Tamar=wife -- husband dies -- Tamar=childless widow. Remember that there has been no real corrective applied after Onan's death; Tamar remains in the d. state. A schematization of verses 13-30 can be constructed thus:

- . . . d. state/adj. (cont.): Tamar=childless widow
- 38:13-23 corrective force/verb: Tamar offers herself to Judah
- 38:24 e. state/adj: Tamar=Judah's pregnant "wife"
disturbing force/verb: Judah orders her killed
d. state/adj: Tamar=possible childless corpse
- 38:25-26 corrective force/verb: Tamar produces her mate
- 38:27-30 SOLUTION - e. state/final adj: Tamar=mother and clan member

Several points should be made here. The first is that the transformation from e. to d. state in verse 24 is similar enough to the pattern of "Tamar=wife -- husband dies -- Tamar=childless widow" to be considered a variation of it. Tamar "marries" Judah according to the underlying intention of the Levirate. But Judah, not recognizing his own responsibility and again unjustly blaming Tamar for destroying his family, actually unwittingly threatens to cut himself off from progeny once again. Ironically, this time instead of too few husbands, Tamar's danger lies in her having one too many. Roland de Vaux notes that the sentence of being burned alive was reserved for severe cases of adultery (betrothed women were held as accountable as married women): "Judah condemned his daughter-in-law Tamar to be burned alive (Gn. 38:24), because he suspected she had given herself to a man at a time when she was the widow of his son Er, and, by the Law of the Levirate,

"promised to his other son Shelah" (p. 36).

Now, the reason Tamar's life is threatened is that she is guilty of adultery, as far as Judah knows. But this is true only if she is in fact betrothed to Shelah. Judah has said so, but his actions have proven otherwise. We know his optative, though seeming to agree with the obligative, is privately and actually opposed to it. Yet he is ready to carry through with his threat, thus finally conforming both verbally and actually with an aspect of the obligative which requires death for adulterers. This is a convenient switch for a man with a problem daughter-in-law. Indeed, Judah shows a marked proclivity for doing away with troublesome family members. Ironically, his obedience to the obligative in this case would result in the deaths of his heirs, an outcome completely contrary to the fulfillment of the progeny promise inherent in other aspects of the obligative will.

Again the corrective force is the procurement--in this case the identification--of a husband. How Tamar successfully stakes her claim as Judah's mate depends on a series of astute business transactions in which one of her promises to him is left unfulfilled. Tamar's dealings with Judah involve what Todorov calls "moods of hypothesis" which are made up of "conditional" and "predictive" relationships (p. 114). Tamar's first step is to "put off her widow's garments, and put on a veil" (38:14), a clothing change which seems to promise the possibility of bought sex. Judah's optative will urges him to approach the "harlot" to take her up on her visual offer. (As Alter points out, Judah becomes the victim of the same trick he had used against his own father with Joseph's bloodstained robe, for both men have been "taken in by a piece of attire" ["LA," 76].) Tamar responds with a statement

such as, "If you give me something, I'll sleep with you." This is a conditional hypothesis, for it promises a certain result on the condition that certain requirements are met. Judah's answer is another conditional: "If you sleep with me, I'll give you a kid from my flock." Tamar comes back with, "If you give me a pledge, I'll accept your terms," whereupon Judah replies, "If you accept my terms, I'll give you the pledge you ask for." Thus the bargain is struck, with each party promising to do something in return for something else. The speaker's will is bound up in the conditional; this is a form of covenant-making.

Tamar is cautious about accepting a promise from Judah. He has used the conditional with her before, to her disadvantage ("If you are patient, I'll give you my third son"). But Judah gets a taste of his own medicine when he agrees to part with his signet and staff; Tamar has no intention of keeping her promise to return them upon delivery of the kid. Just as Judah has kept back something (or someone) belonging to her, Tamar keeps back something belonging to him. Tamar's request for Judah's signet and cord (vv. 18 and 25) requires some background information to make sense to the modern reader. E.A. Speiser says:

The two nouns of Heb. [sic.] must represent a hendiadys, something like "the seal on the cord" . . . , for the following reasons. The items named by Tamar were not chosen for their intrinsic value but for purposes of personal identification, as is made clear by v. 25; when produced in due time, they must allow of no doubt as to their owner. The cylinder seal was such an object above all else; it served as the religious and legal surrogate for the person who wore it, and its impression on a document signaled [sic.] the wearer's readiness to accept all consequences in the event of non-compliance. . . . Now all cylinder seals were perforated vertically for suspension, so that the seal and the cord or chain on which it was worn became a unit. A cord by itself would be a worthless thing and meaningless in the present context. (p. 298, n. 18)

As for the staff, the Hebrew matteh commonly refers to both a rod or stick and one's tribe (cf. Strong's Exhaustive Concordance, #4294). Both Speiser and von Rad suggest that the staff probably figured as a form of personal identification; perhaps it acquired its double meaning because it signified the owner's tribal affiliations. In any case, Tamar's request is both shrewd and witty--her power to protect herself comes from the unmistakable proof of Judah's guilt her possession of these provides. (Tamar's stance, says Alter, is that of "a hard-headed businesswoman," since the seal-and-cord and staff "would have been a kind of ancient Near Eastern equivalent of all a person's major credit cards" ["LA," 76].) Not only that, but her procurement of them symbolizes what she is actually gaining; along with the seal-and-cord, she is given Judah's identity and personal essence when he impregnates her, and her tribal association is made certain when she accepts the staff as proof of her children's lineage.⁹

Behind Tamar's conditional statements are several "predictive" motivations. She sets out to seduce Judah because of the implicit prediction that if she remains at her father's house she will never fulfill her proper societal function. Underneath her spoken bargaining is a double layer of predictions, one strongly implied to Judah in order to disguise the other, of which the reader is aware. Her request for a pledge leads Judah to think that Tamar does not trust him--and why should she? Her reference to a pledge suggests her prediction to be something like, "If I don't exact a pledge, this man might not deliver the kid he's promised." Her true reason for asking, however, is summarized in the statement, "If I don't gain possession of some personal item of his, I won't be able to prove that he impregnated me."

These two predictions together give an ironic twist to the proceedings, for the false motive of gaining surety for the kid comments wryly on the truth that Judah is untrustworthy (though he does attempt to deliver the kid), while the real motive makes a fool out of him. But Tamar is doing more than taking playful revenge on Judah; the prediction on which her real motive is based suggests that if she can prove Judah to be the father of her children, he will refrain from punishing her. This explains why she waits until the last minute to produce her proof; apart from screwing the narrative tension as tightly as possible, her delay ensures that her presentation will be public so that she will be protected by witnesses.

Though no mention is made of whether or not Tamar marries Shelah, and Judah himself does "not lie with her again" (v. 26), Tamar's problem is ultimately solved through the birth of her twin sons, legitimized not only through Judah's admission of fatherhood (v. 26), but also because Judah at last acknowledges her rightful claim as a member of the family: "She is more righteous than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah" (v. 26).¹⁰ Presumably Tamar continues to live with Judah's clan instead of being sent back to her father's house, since her sons will take the place of Judah's first-born in receiving his inheritance. Thus by not keeping her promise to Judah, Tamar forces Judah to keep his promise to her, and a new equilibrium is achieved.

The birth of twins who inexplicably change places serves as a satisfying conclusion to this tale of victorious victim. Judah, though in the wrong, should have had his way because of his absolute power over his daughter-in-law. But God works in strange ways, sometimes

even through the outrageous acts of the so-called powerless, a theme which will recur when Joseph interprets the events of his life as part of God's plan to preserve Jacob's family (45:5-8). The promise of progeny in Genesis works itself out despite human effort perhaps more than because of it. And just as no one knows why one twin is born before the other, no one knows why God chooses to bless certain people. Some, like Tamar, may prove to be more deserving than external circumstances indicate, but others' worth lies solely in their being chosen.

Furthermore, the birth of Tamar's twins hints at the outcome of the struggle between Joseph and his brothers (cf. Goldin). The baby who seems to emerge as first-born is surprisingly outstripped by his brother. There can be little doubt that Judah, who acts as the spokesman for the antagonistic brothers, will be overshadowed by his younger brother Joseph. But the story's conclusion also suggests that Judah, the shrewd and unscrupulous opportunist, is also capable of honest self-appraisal and moral growth. The next time we see him, he takes responsibility for the safety of his youngest brother Benjamin (43:8-10) and for his father's happiness. Rather than trying to save his own reputation, he offers himself voluntarily as a substitute for his brother when Benjamin is accused of stealing Joseph's silver cup. (With Tamar he had served as an unwitting substitute for his sons.) Again the plot will turn on the discovery of a personal item whose ownership is incontestable. And as we return to Joseph in Egypt, we are plunged into yet another, more immediate story of seduction and deception which depends on the recognition of a personal item.¹¹

Chapter III--Life Can Be the Pits
Or, Clothes Make the Man

With the opening of the story's second section in Genesis 39, God's absence in Genesis 37 is completely turned around. Five times in four verses (39:2-5) we are told that "the Lord" is responsible for Joseph's spectacular success in the service of his new master, Potiphar. Again, after Joseph has been falsely accused and imprisoned, "the Lord" ensures that he will be singled out for special treatment (39:21-23). The narrative's new preoccupation with God's intervention on Joseph's behalf temporarily confirms the hints in Tamar's story that Joseph will enjoy a victory of some sort. However, we have had our hopes raised and then frustrated many times already. Perhaps the narrative "doth protest too much" by its now insistent, even blatant linking of God with Joseph.

Two possibilities are raised by these stubbornly repeated statements of God's presence: one is that God's sudden overt patronage of Joseph acts as a partial fulfillment of the relationship promise. Paradoxically, though God was absent while Joseph remained in the land of promise, he shows himself as Joseph's champion after Joseph appears to have lost any claim to that land--much as Tamar, a foreigner, became the honoured matriarch of Judah's lineage only after being sentenced to death. Are we to take this turn of events as a sign that Joseph is to be the conduit of fulfillment for the whole promise after all, even outside the limits of the Promised Land? Joseph's God-given prosperity certainly intimates this.

Conversely, though God is "with" Joseph, the divine-human relationship does little to stave off Joseph's personal disasters. In a sense, this fulfillment is a non-fulfillment, for it begs a further

question. If God's presence offers no guarantee of security, what then is the nature of his promise to be in special relationship with chosen individuals? Rather than clearing up earlier uncertainties, God's presence at the start of Joseph's Egyptian sojourn merely teases us with some very sophisticated theological puzzles.

Both issues--the efficacy of God's promise beyond Canaan's boundaries, and the effect of God's favouritism on personal success--are explored through two closely meshed narrative patterns which reflect changes in Joseph's status and power. As in Genesis 37, Joseph's physical movements continue to operate metaphorically, reinforcing changes in his relationships to other characters and subtly commenting on his situation as an exile from the land of promise. These movements are paralleled by Joseph's various states of dress, with gains of clothing being promises given and losses of clothing symbolizing those promises quashed. To understand how these patterns work together, we will first look at how Joseph moves from place to place, and how those places form a matrix of related images. Then we will overlay the clothing imagery to see how it signals both the improbability and the likelihood that God will be faithful to Joseph.¹

Chapter 39 begins the second phase of Joseph's story by introducing a variation of the descent pattern in chapter 37--the movements of Joseph in relation to various "houses." Because Joseph has descended almost as far as he will, his ups and downs become less prominent, though his family's ups and downs from Canaan to Egypt will continue to be significant. Upon entering Egypt, Joseph's life changes from rural to urban, from semi-nomadic to residential; therefore the story's spatial orientation shifts as well.

Joseph's first Egyptian home is with Potiphar, an influential man (39:1) who recognizes Joseph's potential and makes him "overseer in his house and over all that he had" (39:5). Joseph's new situation bears a striking resemblance to his former status as Jacob's favourite, and as such it reformulates the promise that Joseph will exercise power over his peers. Care has been taken to emphasize Joseph's surprising good fortune through repetition of in (ב²) and house (בית): Joseph is "in the house of his master" (39:2), who "is not greater in this house" than Joseph himself (39:9), because Potiphar has seen that God has made everything prosper "in [Joseph's] hands" (39:3) and has therefore "put him in charge of all that he had" (39:4--lit. "and of all he had he gave into his hands," my translation). Indeed, v. 5 alone mentions house three times, making Potiphar the recipient of God's blessing "for Joseph's sake." Potiphar's house is definitely the "in" place to be, and Joseph is in as far as he can get--except concerning Potiphar's wife.

But Joseph's in-house privileges, while promising success, eventually cause his downfall. Potiphar's wife has "cast her eyes upon Joseph" (39:7), urging him "day after day" to "lie with her" (39:10), to no avail:

But one day, when he went into the house [literally "houseward"] to do his work and none of the men of the house was there in the house, she caught him by his garment, saying, "Lie with me." But he left his garment in her hand and fled and got out of the house [literally "went outside"].
(39:11-12)

Joseph's movements have been to go toward and away from the house--inside (houseward) to do his work and outside to remain faithful to his master. But Mrs. Potiphar tells a very different tale, playing on the same motif:

. . . She called to the men of her household and said to them, "See he has brought among us a Hebrew to insult us; he came in to me [lit. "he brought to me"] to lie with me, . . . and when he heard that I lifted up my voice and cried, he left his garment with me, and fled and got out of the house." (39:14-15)

Joseph has entered the house when no other man is there, thus bearing witness to Potiphar's absolute trust in him. Once inside, he is grabbed by the lustful Mrs. Potiphar, who "lifts up her voice" just enough to proposition him, forcing Joseph to flee away from the house in a vain attempt to preserve his master's trust. Mrs. Potiphar then calls the household menservants, presumably into the house, to accuse Joseph. In effect, Joseph's status as an intimate member of the household is now filled by these other servants, while Joseph finds himself out in the cold. Because Joseph has refused to go near (to Mrs. Potiphar), he must now go away--from the house and his master's favour. And the men who have been out of the house (the other servants and Potiphar himself) are now in. Joseph has lost his chance for success, at least through this avenue. The episode ends ironically when Potiphar responds to Joseph's alleged crime by putting him into another house, "the prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined" (39:20).

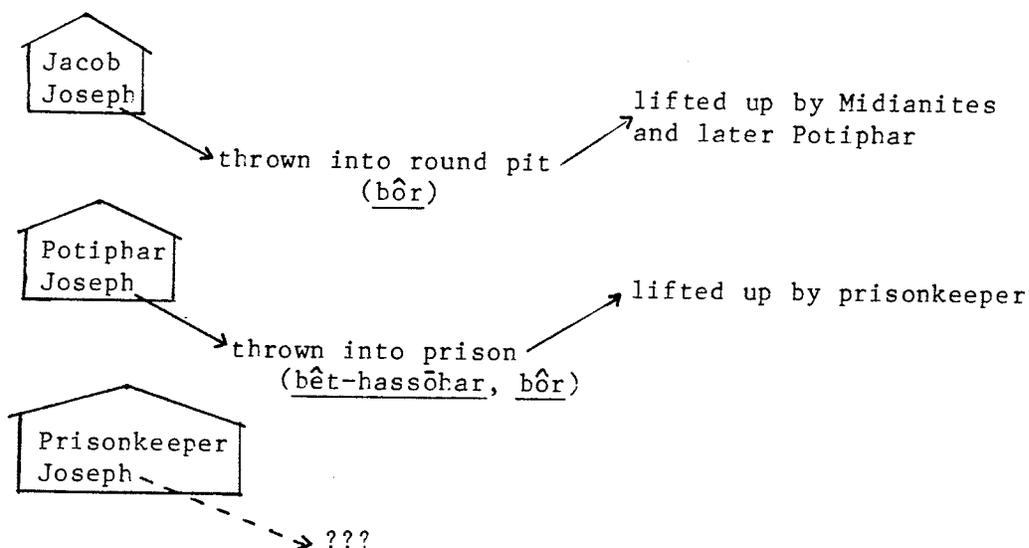
Chapter 40 draws parallels between Potiphar's house and the prison by describing the prison as being "in the house of the captain of the guard" (40:3). Joseph had risen to prominence in the house of the captain of the guard (39:1ff.); now he rises to a similar position in the prison within the captain of the guard's jurisdiction.³ (See also 40:7.) Just as Joseph has "found favor in [Potiphar's] sight" (39:4), so he finds "favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison (39:21) and

is entrusted with the care of "all the prisoners who were in the prison (39:22). Furthermore, this is no place for ordinary criminals, but is rather the prison for Egypt's politically elite (39:20 and 40:1-3), of whom Joseph is given custody (39:22 and 40:4).

Joseph has come a long way since his brothers threw him into a dusty cistern in the Canaanite wilderness. Yet his descent into that pit has anticipated his future domiciles. The Hebrew word translated as pit in 37:20-29 is bôr, meaning "pit" or "cistern."⁴ Such pits in the Ancient Near East were usually round and smooth-sided, having been hewn from rock and plastered for storing water during dry spells.⁵ The Hebrew word for the king's prison in 39:20-23 is bêt-hassōhar, literally "house of roundness" or "roundhouse."⁶ Thus, the circular bôr bears a close physical resemblance to the bêt-hassōhar in which Potiphar confines him, and that "house of roundness" mocks Joseph's earlier, more desirable situation in the Egyptian's house. Furthermore, when Joseph describes his situation in 40:15, he uses the word bôr, translated in the RSV as "dungeon."⁷

The king's prison, as both roundhouse/pit and "house of the captain of the guard" (40:3), becomes a key image for tying together all of Joseph's resting spots up to this point. On one level or another, pit = house = prison, so that whatever is Joseph's circumstance, it acts paradoxically both to thwart and to make possible the fulfillment of Joseph's promised future. Instead of becoming his grave, the Canaanite pit is transformed into a mere way station for Joseph, providing an ironic escape for this hated prisoner. Then, enslavement to an Egyptian becomes an opportunity for advancement, as Potiphar recognizes Joseph's administrative ability. Conversely, Joseph's

favoured status with Potiphar, as with Jacob earlier, leads indirectly to Joseph's imprisonment in a circular dungeon, where he again rises to a position of promise as the authority figure's right-hand man:



Will Joseph be taken down yet another notch? Will he be lifted up? What are the implications of Joseph's being "in" with the prison authorities, especially since he now gains access to some of the most powerful (though disgraced) men in Egypt?

At this point Tamar's story may give us more clues. We have seen that, in Todorov's terms, her story's structure follows the pattern of Tamar=wife -- husband dies -- Tamar=childless widow. This pattern recurs three times, with the third being a variation of the first two. In each case, the corrective force is her procurement of another mate in order to fulfill the promise inherent in her first marriage to Er. But Joseph is a victim of family disintegration as well, at least in the first instance, above. We have seen that Joseph's positions with both Potiphar and the prisonkeeper are virtually identical to his being Jacob's favourite son, especially since a son was expected to serve his

father much as a slave, but with eagerness and joy (cf. Blidstein, 49 & 53-55). Certainly Joseph's service to Potiphar and the prisonkeeper could be characterized as going beyond the normal expectations of a slave's willingness. Therefore, we can reasonably view Potiphar and the prisonkeeper as substitute fathers. Perhaps the Tamar pattern applies here as well, with a few adjustments. There are two ways to do this:

- 1) Jacob=father -- son "dies" -- Jacob=childless widower
 Pot.="father" -- "son" leaves -- Pot.=childless man
 p.keep.="father" -- "son" ???

- 2) Joseph=son -- leaves Jacob -- Joseph=fatherless child
 Joseph="son" -- leaves Pot. -- Joseph=fatherless child
 Joseph="son" -- ???

In Tamar's case, the third occurrence of the narrative pattern had her betrothed and pregnant yet exiled and facing death. The only way true equilibrium could be achieved was through her being pardoned and permanently re-admitted as a member of Judah's household. Similarly, Joseph will not enjoy true sonship until he is re-admitted into his proper context in Jacob's household. To be the favoured "son" of the prisonkeeper is a mockery of his promised status in Genesis 37, just as for Tamar to be exiled to her father's house was a mockery of her promised status as wife of Judah's first-born. Somehow, just as Tamar left her father's house to join with Judah, Joseph must leave prison and be reunited with Jacob. The third time around there is no way to go but up.

Enter Pharaoh's chief butler and baker, imprisoned for unspecified crimes. Joseph, as their assigned servant, becomes privy to their intimate concerns and is able to interpret their troubling dreams. Though his social status has been progressively lowered, his scope of

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authority has increased; thus, the promise that he will gain pre-eminence moves subtly closer to fulfillment. As a favourite son, Joseph could merely report on the condition of his family's wealth (flocks) and the doings of other family members. As a favourite slave, Joseph was given control of his master's wealth and all household members except for Potiphar and his wife. Now as a favourite prisoner, Joseph exhibits the ability to foretell matters of life and death. This oracular ability gives Joseph an aura of the numinous but does nothing to improve his condition--at least not immediately. The chief butler forgets him, eliminating his only hope of escape, unless Potiphar, who is not mentioned after chapter 39, reappears either to condemn him or to restore him.⁸ Here is Tamar's pattern once again: instead of immediately securing her proper place in Judah's household, her success at getting pregnant first threatens her life. So too, instead of effecting his immediate release, Joseph's success with Pharaoh's butler leaves him languishing in prison.

The parallel becomes more apparent when we consider Joseph's long imprisonment with no resolution of his guilt or innocence. In the Ancient Near East, imprisonment was not considered a form of punishment but rather a method of confining the accused until his case could be settled. Punishments, including mutilation and dismemberment, were meted out according to the nature of the crime.⁹ Thus it seems strange that Joseph receives no such treatment from the man he was accused of cuckolding; adultery was an offence punishable by death, especially if the accused was a trusted slave, for such a violation was tantamount to treason (cf. von Rad, 361-62).

However, an understanding of the Hebrew concept of Sheol, or abode of the dead, makes Joseph's situation comprehensible. Though the name Sheol is peculiar to Hebrew, the concept was widespread in neighbouring Mesopotamia and Canaan, whose literature portrays the afterlife as a shadowy subterranean existence.¹⁰ For example the Akkadian poem "Descent of Ishtar to the Nether World" describes the goddess' journey:

To the dark house, the abode of Irkal[la],
 To the house which none leave who have entered it,
 To the road from which there is no way back,
 To the house wherein the entrants are bereft of li[ght]
 Where dust is their fare and clay their food.
 (Where) they see no light, residing in darkness,
 (Where) they are clothed like birds, with wings for garments,
 (And where) over door and bolt is spread dust.¹¹

(Note the metaphorical use of house to describe death.)

Biblical depictions of Sheol are found throughout the Prophets and Wisdom literature, including this lament from Psalms 88:

- 3 . . . my soul is full of troubles,
 and my life draws near to Sheol.
- 4 I am reckoned among those who go down to the Pit;
 I am a man who has no strength,
- 5 like one forsaken among the dead,
 like the slain that lie in the grave,
 like those whom thou dost remember no more,
 for they are cut off from thy hand.
- 6 Thou hast put me in the depths of the Pit,
 in the regions dark and deep. . . .
- 8 Thou has caused my companions to shun me;
 thou hast made me a thing of horror to them.
 I am shut in so that I cannot escape
- 10 Dost thou work wonders for the dead?
 Do the shades rise up to praise thee?
- 11 Is thy steadfast love declared in the grave,
 or thy faithfulness in Abaddon?
- 12 Are thy wonders known in the darkness,
 or thy saving help in the land of forgetfulness?

This Psalm combines several images which are pertinent to Joseph's predicament. First, Sheol is called "the Pit" where the psalmist is "shut in so that [he] cannot escape" (vv.4,6,8). Secondly, the psalmist is "a man who has no strength" (v.4), just as Joseph loses his power to act on his own behalf when he is thrown into the wilderness pit and later into the king's dungeon. The psalmist, like Joseph, is "one forsaken among the dead" (v.5), "in the land of forgetfulness" (v.12). And the psalmist asks the question which is of central importance to Joseph's story: "Are [God's] wonders known in the darkness, / or [his] saving help in the land of forgetfulness?"

Perhaps even more significant is Job's complaint:

If I look for Sheol as my house,
 if I spread my couch in darkness,
 if I say to the pit, "You are my father,"
 and to the worm, "My mother," or "My sister,"
 where then is my hope?
 Who will see my hope?

Will it go down to the bars of Sheol?
 Shall we descend together into the dust?

(Job 17: 13-16)

Here Job, like Joseph, has been separated from his family and his household, and like the psalmist Job wonders whether hope can accompany him to Sheol, which is here described as a prison ("bars"). Just as Joseph finds a substitute father in prison, so Job sees himself as a child of Sheol. Thus Sheol, which is also not a place of punishment, but merely a kind of holding tank for the dead, bears a close resemblance to Joseph's prison.¹²

Joseph, then, receives no punishment for his alleged crime because, unlike Tamar, he is already figuratively dead. Whether or not Potiphar understands this is irrelevant; on the narrative level Joseph

must remain where he is. Therefore, Jacob's earlier mistaken assumption that his son had died is metaphorically true, for Joseph has moved from Jacob's house to Potiphar's house to the roundhouse which for him is the House of Death.¹³ Furthermore, Jacob's assertion that he himself will "go down to Sheol to my son" (37:35) ironically foreshadows his future move from Canaan to Egypt.¹⁴ Thus, pit = house = prison = Sheol = Egypt. Though Jacob's family starts out dwelling in the land of promise, Jacob's favorite son spends most of his time in the land of the dead.¹⁵

Yet, by entering the land of death, Joseph (like Tamar) will preserve life, including God's promise of progeny to Jacob, for he is made responsible for supplying all the food in Egypt (41:46-49) and ultimately the whole world (41:57). (Later Joseph himself will tell us that God intended for him to act as a preserver of life; see 45:5,7). Now instead of being a prison, Egypt has become the place of store-cities (41:48), not for storing the dead but for storing grain.¹⁶ Just as both Potiphar's and the prisonkeeper's houses flourished when Joseph took charge of them (39:2-6, 21-23), so Egypt's cities are filled with bounty through Joseph's shrewd management. Joseph's presence has transformed the Pit of Death into the Pit of Life.

In contrast, life in Canaan is bleak, even before the famine. The pit into which the brothers throw Joseph is "empty, there was no water in it" (37:24). Since these pits are meant to store water during dry spells, the area around Dothan must be experiencing a longer-than-usual drought, because the life-sustaining water in this pit is already used up. It is likely that Shechem has even less to offer, since the

brothers move the flock from there to Dothan. So much for the land of promise. Joseph's private Sheol--the dry cistern--exemplifies the condition of Jacob's family's dwelling in the land of Canaan. Thus far, God's promise to be in special relationship to Jacob's descendants has proven to be ambiguous at best. Even the promise of progeny is called into question, since the history of Jacob's family is destined to play itself out in Sheol.

Rounding out this paradox of death and life are the clothing changes Joseph makes as he moves in and out of each Sheol configuration.¹⁷ Immediately after Joseph is introduced in 27:2, we are told that Jacob "loved Joseph more than any other of his children . . . and he made him a long robe with sleeves" (37:3). This robe symbolizes the power Jacob bestows on Joseph, though Joseph's authority at this point is potential rather than actual. (He is, after all, the eleventh of twelve brothers and is only seventeen years old when the story begins.) Not surprisingly, the brothers strip off Joseph's precious robe before throwing him into the pit (37:23), thus removing the sign of Jacob's promise to him.

Ironically, the robe also provides a convenient alibi to explain Joseph's disappearance:

Then they took Joseph's robe, and killed a goat, and dipped the robe in the blood; and they sent the long robe with sleeves and brought it to their father, and said, "This we have found; see now whether it is your son's robe or not." And he recognized it, and said, "it is my son's robe; a wild beast has devoured him; Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces." (37:31-33)

Jacob rightly understands the empty robe to be a sign of Joseph's powerlessness, but he foolishly mistakes the goat's blood as a sign that Joseph's life has been poured out. The father then demonstrates

his grief by tearing his own clothes and donning the garments of Sheol (37:34) as a sign promising that he will join his son in the nether world (37:35).

Joseph's second "father" Potiphar makes a similar mistake in accepting his wife's story of how Joseph's garment came into her possession. Though Joseph has escaped Mrs. Potiphar's amorous grasp by slipping out of his garment, she implies that her protestations against his advances have prevented him from putting it on (39:11-18). Either way, he must leave "his garment in her hand" (39:12,13) in order to flee. Just as his being cast into the pit follows immediately after his brothers take his robe, so Joseph's imprisonment in the roundhouse follows after he leaves his garment with Mrs. Potiphar. In both cases, his loss of clothing signifies his loss of status. This explains why Joseph does not make good his escape before Potiphar comes home; without his borrowed authority, the disrobed slave can go nowhere except to the house of Sheol. The favourite son, slave, and prisoner is then left to rot in a death-like existence, forgotten by the man whose life has been restored.

"After two whole years" (41:1), that man, Pharaoh's butler, remembers and fulfills his promise to Joseph in prison to "make mention of [him] to Pharaoh, and so get [him] out of this house" (40:14). To get out of Potiphar's house, Joseph has undressed, but to get out of the roundhouse, Joseph takes care to dress himself appropriately: "Then Pharaoh sent and called Joseph, and they brought him hastily out of the dungeon; and when he had shaved himself and changed his clothes, he came in before Pharaoh" (41:14). Here is a significant twist, again

running parallel with Tamar's story--Joseph shaves and dresses himself in preparation for meeting Pharaoh, exhibiting a new ability to act on his own behalf. (Tamar, upon taking her fate into her own hands, dresses herself in preparation for intercepting Judah). Then, after interpreting Pharaoh's dreams, Joseph offers shrewd advice for coping with Egypt's agricultural future. Pharaoh is so impressed, he literally invests Joseph with his own authority:

So Pharaoh said to Joseph, ". . . you shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command; only as regard the throne will I be greater than you." And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Behold, I have set you over all the land of Egypt." Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph's hand, and arrayed him in garments of fine linen, and put a gold chain about his neck. . . . Thus he set him over all the land of Egypt. (41:39-43)

Joseph's new position thus completes the third father/house pattern begun in the Egyptian prison. By leaving the prison, Joseph leaves his prisonkeeper "father" and again becomes an orphan away from "home," but this leavetaking is a necessary prerequisite for the pattern's final corrective force: Joseph's "adoption" by Pharaoh and his return to his rightful societal role, a shift which allows the story's promises to resume their moving toward fulfillment.¹⁸ Just as Tamar's corrective force was to become the right man's wife, Joseph's corrective force is to become the right man's son. Though he has yet to be reunited with his biological father, Joseph need move from house to house no longer; henceforth the story will focus on Jacob's move from his house in Canaan to Joseph's house in Egypt.

In summary, Joseph's physical locations are intricately connected with his state of dress, and both motifs reflect Joseph's impotence or power, his dying or living, as he moves from place to place:

Jacob gives Joseph a robe and favoured status in the family.

The bros. strip him and cast him into a pit which is outside Jacob's family and the land of promise.

Potiphar gives Joseph authority in and over his house.

Mrs. Potiphar strips him and has him thrown into prison, after he flees outside the house.

Joseph is called out of prison. He dresses himself and comes into Pharaoh's presence.

Pharaoh gives Joseph new clothes appropriate to his new status in and over Pharaoh's house and all the land of Egypt.²⁰

There is no narrative reason for Potiphar to give a garment to Joseph, since such an acquisition is implied when Mrs. Potiphar later takes Joseph's garment away. Furthermore, on the text's formal level the promise of special relationship, symbolized elsewhere by gifts of clothing, is here realized through the repeated statements that God is "with Joseph." Ironically, even the baldly-stated fact of fulfillment does not guarantee the end of Joseph's problems, for Joseph relinquishes his position in Potiphar's house voluntarily, rather than jeopardizing his relationship with God (39:9).²¹

Paradoxically, Joseph must leave in order to arrive, lose in order to gain, and die in order to live. As he moves farther from his initial seat of power, he moves closer to his ultimate triumph. Gradually God's promise of land, relationship, and progeny seems possible, and Joseph seems an ever more likely candidate for its

fulfillment. Certainly Joseph is aware of this possibility by the time his two sons are born; their names, according to Joseph, recall that "God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house" (41:51) and "has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction" (41:25). Joseph's progeny may be half-Egyptian, and his particular land of promise may be Egypt, but God is still with him. Whether this divine-human relationship also holds good for Jacob remains to be seen.

We have seen how pit, prison, house, Egypt, and Sheol function as a cluster of related motifs having to do with the promise of land; in the same way, silver, grain, and various sons of Jacob represent the promise of progeny.¹ This, the third element of the divine promise, manifests itself in Joseph's story as a concern about survival. Throughout the story, Jacob is especially anxious about the survival of his beloved Joseph and, later, Benjamin, but famine eventually forces him to consider the needs of his whole family. Despite receiving God's promise that his descendants "shall be like the dust of the earth" and "shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south" (Gen. 28:14), Jacob reveals his lack of faith through his repeated efforts to control his sons' destinies, and through his wheeling and dealing for food. Indeed, buying and selling as a means to preserve life operates as the controlling narrative pattern in the story's third segment, in which our attention is once again focused on the family of Jacob as the brothers and finally Jacob himself descend into Egypt.

However, like the imagery of the Pit, the buying and selling pattern first appears in the story's opening segment, Genesis 37. After the brothers have thrown Joseph into the empty cistern, they change their minds about killing him outright:

Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels bearing gum, balm, and myrrh, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we slay our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers heeded him. Then Midianite traders passed by; and they drew Joseph up and lifted him

out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver; and they took Joseph to Egypt. (37:25-28)

This passage constitutes one of the so-called textual problems identified by more traditional biblical scholarship. Just what precisely is going on here? Judah suggests that Joseph be sold to the Ishmaelites whom the brothers happen to see passing by at an opportune moment. Put if we are to take the narrative at face value, the brothers never complete the sale, because Midianite traders beat them to it. According to 37:36, it is the Midianites who sell him, not to the Ishmaelites, but directly to Potiphar in Egypt. But, after the story is sidetracked by the tale of Judah and Tamar in chapter 38, we read in 39:1 that the Ishmaelites are responsible for bringing Joseph to Egypt and selling him to Potiphar. Later, Joseph himself offers two different interpretations of the event. In describing his situation to Pharaoh's butler, he says, "I was indeed stolen out of the land of the Hebrews" (40:15), but when he reveals himself to his brothers in Egypt, Joseph names them as having sold him (45:5).

George Coats explains these anomalies as additions to or glosses on the story (pp. 17-20). His argument, however, fails to address the problem of why the final redactor(s) did nothing to reconcile these contradictions in the final version.² I propose that we read the story just as it appears, without trying to introduce hypotheses about which textual fragments are earlier or later than others. Our first step is to separate the dialogic contradictions from the narrative ones, because often what the characters say differs markedly from what the narrative asserts, and these differences raise important questions about the characters' reliability. Since we have not yet determined

whose words we can trust, we cannot assume that any of the characters really know or tell the truth about who is responsible for the sale.

Judah's speech outlining his plan to sell Joseph to the Ishmaelites is nothing more than a statement of intent--a promise of profit which may or may not come to pass. The fact that Judah's promise is immediately threatened by the sudden appearance of the Midianite traders once again raises the question of whether or not any promises in this story will be kept. Reuben's discovery of Joseph's absence from the pit (37:29-30) can be read as an indication that Midianites indeed are responsible for selling Joseph without the brothers' knowledge. Then Joseph's statement about having been stolen is not unlikely. On the other hand, the act of stealing may very well be attributed to the brothers instead of the Midianites.

How are we to resolve this dilemma? The brothers are certainly guilty by intent, if not by action. But the Midianite traders have thwarted any possibility of the brothers' changing their minds and being merciful. (Reuben's distress at finding the pit empty has long been interpreted as a sign that he, at least, meant to carry through with his original plan to rescue Joseph, cited in v. 22.) Rather than muddying the narrative structure, these "contradictions" actually dramatize one of the story's central questions: who is to blame/ who should get credit for what happens to Joseph, especially since it ultimately affects the whole world? Just as the mysterious appearance of the man at Shechem hints that God may be at least partially responsible for Joseph's falling into his brothers' hands, so too the ambiguous role of the Midianites serves to place the question of culpability into a larger arena. Therefore, any number of agents may

be at work here: the brothers, the Midianites, the Ishmaelites, or perhaps even God. After all, though it sends Joseph into the land of death, the sale paradoxically saves his life and provides the means for the preservation of all humankind, thereby also preserving the promise of progeny. Judah's words thus contain a delicious irony; besides his more immediate concern revealed in the word play between "profit" and "sell" (37:26-27), Judah unwittingly foretells the significant profit he and his brothers will gain through this sale once they themselves face death.

They become the butt of this narrative joke in another way as well, for it is the Midianites, not the brothers, who get paid for the merchandise. Significantly, Joseph is sold for "twenty shekels of silver," (37:28), which in Hebrew is simply twenty keseph--קסד.³ The last two elements in Joseph's name--יוס--are identical to those in keseph, and since Joseph is exchanged for keseph, the word play suggests that one becomes a substitute for the other.⁴ If the brothers are indeed party to this transaction, they must eventually end up with either the keseph or Joseph, even though the Midianites seem to have made off with both. The intrusion of the Midianites delays the completion of the transaction, at least as far as the brothers are concerned, and thus delays the fulfillment of Judah's promise of profit. How the brothers recover both the missing keseph and the missing Joseph to realize their profit forms the plot of the story's third segment, Gen. 42-47.

The transition from Joseph in Egypt to Jacob and his other sons in Canaan occurs at the end of Genesis 41: "So when the famine had spread over all the land, Joseph opened all the storehouses, and sold to the

Egyptians, for the famine was severe in the land of Egypt. Moreover, "all the earth came to Egypt to Joseph to buy grain, because the famine was severe over all the earth" (41:56-57). The parallelism between "the famine was severe in the land of Egypt" and "the famine was severe over all the earth" signals a shift in scene, while at the same time it suggests that Egypt is in some ways a microcosm for the world. Just as Joseph has the power of life and death over the Egyptians, so too he will hold similar sway over the whole world. Therefore, when Jacob sends his sons to buy grain, he is really trying to guarantee their survival. Rather than accepting as a gift God's promise of progeny, Jacob tries to buy it.

That we are to pay close attention to Jacob's preoccupation with buying life is made clear by the frequency with which the word buy appears in the verses which reintroduce Jacob and his other sons:

When Jacob learned that there was grain in Egypt, he said to his sons, "Why do you look at one another?" And he said, "Behold, I have heard that there is grain in Egypt; go down and buy grain for us there, that we may live and not die." So ten of Joseph's brothers went down to buy grain in Egypt. But Jacob did not send Benjamin, Joseph's brother, with his brothers, for he feared that harm might befall him. Thus the sons of Israel came to buy among the others who came, for the famine was in the land of Canaan. (42:1-5)

Here the word buy appears three times and grain four times, always in the context of survival.⁵ Jacob himself explicitly links buying with survival, but he also shows some awareness of the risk involved in the venture, because in order to especially protect Benjamin he sends only ten brothers down to Egypt (recalling for us the irony that his other favourite son has thrived there). Finally, the passage ends by including Canaan among the lands hit by famine; the famine is not only severe in Egypt and over all the earth, but it even affects the land of

promise, ostensibly giving Jacob some justification for his doubting God's word.

The scene shifts once more to Egypt, where Joseph is named as both the authority figure and the seller, in contrast to his earlier role as mere merchandise (42:6). The brothers, conversely, are now buyers but also merchandise. Though they have come to buy grain, they also bargain for their lives, and Joseph drives home this point by accusing them falsely and throwing them into prison. To make matters worse, he demands an exorbitant price for sparing their lives--they must bring him their youngest brother:

But Joseph said to them, "It is as I said to you, you are spies. By this you shall be tested: by the life of Pharaoh, you shall not go from this place unless your youngest brother comes here. Send one of you, and let him bring your brother, while you remain in prison, that your words may be tested, whether there is truth in you; or else by the life of Pharaoh, surely you are spies." And he put them all together in prison for three days. (42:14-17)

Notice that Joseph has instructed them to "send one," and yet he puts them all in prison (again, bêṭ-hassōḥar). How are they to fulfill the terms of his demand if they are all confined? They remain at this impasse for three days, re-enacting Joseph's threefold incarceration in the Canaanite cistern, as an Egyptian slave, and, especially, in the roundhouse. Like Joseph, his brothers have truly entered Sheol. Their keseph, then, is worthless as a means for ensuring the fulfillment of the progeny promise. All twelve brothers are either symbolically or imminently dead: Joseph "is no more" as far as Jacob's family is concerned (42:13 & 36), ten brothers are detained in a kind of Pit, and Benjamin faces starvation in Canaan.

On the third day Joseph releases all but Simeon, whom he binds

"before their eyes" (42:24), suggesting the substitution of Simeon the second-oldest for Joseph the second-youngest. The brothers' discussion immediately before Simeon is bound reveals their own guilty association between their present misfortune and their old crime:

Then they said to one another, "In truth we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he besought us and we would not listen; therefore is this distress come upon us." And Reuben answered them, "Did I not tell you not to sin against the lad? But you would not listen. So now there comes a reckoning for his blood." (42:21-22)

The word reckoning places the brothers' explanation squarely in the context of a long-overdue I.O.U. (cf. Brown-Driver-Briggs, 205). Instead of being owed keseph for the old debt of Joseph's sale into bondage, the brothers themselves now owe, with payment being the imprisonment of one of them. Though they are troubled by this turn of events, it must surely come as a relief to think that they have now finally paid for their crime. But much to their chagrin, they are soon to discover that the transaction is not yet completed.

After leaving Simeon in Egypt, the nine brothers make their way back to Canaan with food, so that their survival is prolonged if not assured. But on the journey home, one brother discovers that his keseph has mysteriously reappeared in his sack. Suddenly they have an inkling that the reckoning for Joseph's blood is to be larger than they had imagined: "At this their hearts failed them, and they turned trembling to one another, saying, 'What is this that God has done to us?'" (42:28). We know that Joseph, not God, has done this, yet, in Alter's words, "Joseph in fact is serving as the agent of destiny, as God's instrument, in the large plan of the story" (Art, 139). Once again the question of responsibility makes itself felt, alongside the

narrative's stubborn refusal to let its worldview be reduced to a simple set of cause-and-effect relationships. The question is not whether the brothers have sufficiently paid for their crime, but rather whether it is possible to make either moral or theological deals of any sort.

Upon their return to Jacob in Canaan, the brothers report their difficulties, leaving out any mention of the returned money. Their words reveal their lack of understanding about what has happened to them, for they persist in using the language of trade. In relating to Jacob the Egyptian Prime Minister's instructions, they misquote what he has promised to do: "Then the man, the lord of the land, said to us, 'By this I shall know that you are honest men: leave one of your brothers with me, and take grain for the famine of your households, and go your way. Bring your youngest brother to me; then I shall know that you are not spies but honest men, and I will deliver to you your brother, and you shall trade in the land'" (42:34). Joseph has not promised to deliver their brother to them, though, ironically, he will deliver the brother they think "is no more." He has, in fact, offered no guarantee that either Simeon or Benjamin will be returned, only that none of the brothers will die (42:20). Though the brothers seem to interpret this statement as a promise that they will be allowed to "trade in the land," Joseph's returning their money indicates that he is not interested in selling to them. By giving them grain, he keeps them in subjection to him even while he preserves their lives.

There now arises another textual anomaly similar to the Midianite/Ishmaelite problem discussed earlier. At the end of their speech to Jacob, the nine brothers empty their sacks, only to be

frightened by the discovery of "every man's bundle of keseph" (42:35). But one brother already discovered money in his sack on the way from Egypt, and the others reacted accordingly. Is it possible that only one brother opened his sack at the lodging place, so that the other brothers are genuinely surprised at the discovery of money in their sacks at home? Though the brothers are at times amazingly obtuse, this explanation seems farfetched. Much more plausible is the argument put forward by Alter, in his chapter entitled "Composite Artistry". Because it forms the basis for much of my interpretation of Joseph's story, I will present it in Alter's own words. He begins with an outline of the source hypothesis, which "essentially explains this duplication as a clumsy piece of editing" (Art, p. 138). But such an explanation assumes an ignorance on the part of the biblical editor(s) which is insupportable:

The contradiction between verses 27-28 and verse 35 is so evident that it seems naive on the part of any modern reader to conclude that the ancient Hebrew writer was so inept or unperceptive that the conflict between the two versions could have somehow escaped him. Let me suggest that, quite to the contrary, the Hebrew writer was perfectly aware of the contradiction but viewed it as a superficial one. In linear logic, the same action could not have occurred twice in two different ways; but in the narrative logic which with the writer worked, it made sense to incorporate both versions available to him because together they brought forth mutually complementary implications of the narrated event, thus enabling him to give a complete imaginative account of it.⁶

The brothers have made a connection between their imprisonment and their crime. They have then experienced a further reckoning at the lodging place. Now, back home in Canaan, they feel the full weight of their guilt, for not one, but every brother's keseph reappears to implicate him, this time in the presence of their grieving father.

Here, then, is the missing keseph from the brothers' sale of Joseph in chapter 37. Jacob's response is significant, for he blames them for the loss, not only of Simeon, but also of Joseph: "You have bereaved me of my children: Joseph is no more, and Simeon is no more, and now you "would take Benjamin; all this has come upon me" (42:36). Reuben then offers his own two sons as payment for Benjamin, but Jacob, like Joseph, refuses to deal, reiterating his earlier promise that the loss of his favourite son would "bring down [his] gray hairs with sorrow to Sheol" (42:38).

What are the brothers to do? If they do not return to Egypt, they, together with Jacob, will die. If they do return, they risk losing Benjamin and Jacob at the very least. Chapter 43 opens with an echo of their situation before their first journey to Egypt: "Now the famine was severe in the land" (v.1). Obviously, little has changed for Jacob's family; their situation is as frustrating a stalemate as was Joseph's imprisonment, and Jacob, like Pharaoh's butler, does nothing to bail them out. Finally, when Jacob tells his sons to "Go again, buy us a little food" (43:2), Judah pries Benjamin loose by offering himself as ransom (43:8-9).

Jacob's response indicates his ambivalence about relinquishing control. He tries to make a show of his buying power by sending, besides Benjamin, a present and double the necessary money (43:11-14), both to absolve his sons of blame, and to avoid being completely beholden to the Egyptian. And what a present it is, from a man supposedly facing starvation! The items listed--balm, honey, gum, myrrh, pistachio nuts, and almonds--could only be given by someone whose power rests on enormous wealth.⁷

His decision reflects his pride, but it also signals his growing acquiescence to God's sovereignty, for Jacob calls on El Shaddai--the God of the high places⁸--to grant his sons mercy even as far away as low-lying Egypt, rather than trusting the Egyptian's doubtful benevolence. Thus, even though he is ready to pay the full price to keep his family alive, he begins to recognize God's refusal to be manipulated. Though God has promised him progeny, Jacob resigns himself to the possibility that the promise may not be fulfilled, at least the way he thinks it should be: "May God Almighty [El Shaddai] grant you mercy before the man, that he may send back your other brother and Benjamin. If I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved" (43:14).

For the brothers, however, the bargaining for life continues. They take the present, double the money, and Benjamin down to Egypt, but this time, rather than bowing they stand before Joseph (43:15). He invites them for a meal at his house, but the brothers are fearful that, because of the money replaced in their sacks, "he may seek occasion against us and fall upon us, to make slaves of us" (43:18). Once again, keseph is associated with slavery, and once again the brothers protest their innocence. The difference, of course, is that, unlike their alibi concerning the missing Joseph in Gen. 37, the brothers now tell the truth concerning the missing keseph.

The steward's reassurance, the return of Simeon, and the sumptuous feast they enjoy in Joseph's house allay their suspicions. Imagine their horror, then, when Joseph suddenly accuses them, through his steward, of stealing his silver cup (which he himself has planted among their belongings). This accusation is much more personal than that of

spying, since it implies not only a gross violation of the code of hospitality, but also a stripping of Joseph's power, even an assault on his life. The steward's words reflect this intimacy, for they seem to come directly from Joseph himself: "Why have you returned evil for good? Why have you stolen my silver cup? Is it not from this that my lord drinks, and by this that he divines? You have done wrong in doing so" (44:4-5). The theft of the silver cup deprives Joseph of drink (life) and knowledge (power), losses which threatened Joseph in the dry cistern of his youth. Thus, his accusation reverberates with the pain and bitterness of his true case against his brothers.

The brothers, of course, understand none of this. Confident that they can at last prove their innocence, they extravagantly promise that if a thief is found among them they will all become slaves to Joseph, while the guilty party must die. Joseph's mocking response adjusts the terms of their offer to more accurately reflect his own experience: "Let it be as you say: he with whom it is found shall be my slave, and the rest of you shall be blameless" (44:10). Though the brothers think Joseph is dead, he has in fact survived as a slave to an influential Egyptian, in exchange for keseph. So too the man who is found with Joseph's keseph cup, a symbol for the missing Joseph himself, will become the slave of a high-ranking "Egyptian." Of course the "culprit" is none other than Benjamin, the son who has become a second Joseph to his father. Once again the brothers must break the news to Jacob that his favourite son "is no more."

This third discovery of keseph in their sacks, like the first, occurs at an unnamed location between Joseph's city and Jacob's holdings in Canaan. That the brothers are now irrevocably cut off from

their home becomes evident in their return, not to Jacob, but to Joseph's house. Not daring to stand or even to bow before Joseph, like mourners they rend their clothes, and like dead men they fall to the ground (44:13-14). At last they have wholly succumbed to what they think is divine retribution. In Judah's words, "What shall we say to my lord? What shall we speak? Or how can we clear ourselves? God has found out the guilt of your servants" (44:16). Knowing that they cannot return to Jacob without Benjamin, they offer to pay for their guilt by fulfilling their promise to all become Joseph's slaves, but he again refuses to deal: "Only the man in whose hand the cup was found shall be my slave; but as for you, go up in peace to your father" (44:17). The terms of the transaction have not changed from Gen. 37; there must be one slave in exchange for silver, a Joseph for keseph.

At last Judah, the initiator of the original sale, offers him the terms he has been waiting for. Explaining that Benjamin's absence will cause his father's death, Judah presents himself as a substitute--one slave, one life for the silver cup, instead of two lives: "Now therefore, let your servant, I pray you, remain instead of the lad as a slave to my lord; and let the lad go back with his brothers. For how can I go back to my father if the lad is not with me? I fear to see the evil that would come upon my father" (44:33-34).

Judah has promised to serve as collateral for the loan of Benjamin in order to finance any further deals with the Egyptian Prime Minister. Now he makes good his promise, proving himself (as with Tamar) to be trustworthy in spite of his dishonest past. Notice that Judah argues neither on his own nor on Benjamin's behalf, but for the sake of his father. No longer the jealous brother trying to dispose of his

father's favourite, he voluntarily sacrifices himself in exchange for his father's happiness. In effect, Judah replaces not only Benjamin but the pre-Egyptian Joseph whom he paradoxically "killed" yet saved from death so long ago. The sale is complete, the silver has been accounted for, and the missing Joseph shows up, both figuratively and literally.

Joseph's sudden reappearance at this juncture has the same effect on the brothers as had the three reappearances of the keseph: "And Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am Joseph; is my father still alive?' But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed at his presence" (45:3). We can almost hear echoes of their earlier cry, "What is this that God has done to us?" Joseph's forgiving response to their unspoken question untangles the knotty problem of culpability at the same time it claims at least a partial fulfillment of the divine promise of progeny:

So Joseph said to his brothers, "Come near to me, I pray you." And they came near. And 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 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; and he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. (45:4-5, 7-8)

Instead of lording it over his brothers as before, Joseph politely asks them to please come closer. When they comply, they literally take steps toward being reconciled with their enemy. Joseph then names their old crime but places their guilt behind them, since great good has come of it through the working out of God's purpose. This is not to say that their action was morally justifiable, but rather that God used it to a different end than they had intended. The profit from

their original sale proves to be much greater than twenty shekels of silver, for Joseph promises to provide for all of Jacob's family (45:9-11). Furthermore, their long-standing feud is now over--Joseph kisses all his brothers, and they, who at one time "could not speak peaceably to him" (37:4), now are comfortable talking with him (45:15).

All that remains is for Jacob to be told the good news. The brothers, having been playfully admonished by Joseph to "not quarrel on the way" (45:24), return to Canaan loaded with presents (45:21-23) and the promise that Jacob and his sons will be given "the best of the land of Egypt" (45:18). Besides twenty pack animals carrying food, and wagons to make the journey more comfortable, the presents include festal garments for all the brothers, plus 300 shekels of silver for Benjamin--a return of 1500% on the original twenty shekels.

Once in Egypt, Jacob and his sons enjoy the fulfillment of Joseph's promise to give them land and food, in stark contrast to the Egyptians who must buy their survival. The Egyptians use up all their keseph, then trade in their cattle, and finally sell themselves and their land to avoid starvation. Eventually all of Egypt, except for the priest's land, belongs to Pharaoh (47:13-26). But Jacob's family lives in special relationship the Prime Minister who, like God, has power to save lives.

Two passages frame the narrative's description of Egypt's plight :

Then Joseph settled his father and his brothers, and gave them a possession in the land of Egypt, in the best of the land, in the land of Rameses, as Pharaoh had commanded. And Joseph provided his father, his brothers, and all his father's household with food, according to the number of their dependents. (47:11-12)

Thus Israel dwelt in the land of Egypt, in the land of Goshen; and they gained possessions in it, and were fruitful and multiplied exceedingly. And Jacob lived in the land of

Egypt seventeen years; so the days of Jacob, the years of his life, were a hundred and forty-seven years. (47:27-28)

This frame structure emphasizes that the three elements of God's promise--land, progeny, and special relationship--are fulfilled for Jacob not through business deals but through the generosity of God's deputy in Egypt, while the Egyptians themselves must continue to bargain for survival. In these passages the elements of land and relationship are fulfilled only indirectly. Jacob receives land in Egypt, not Canaan; and he enjoys Joseph's special favour, not specifically God's, though the story has linked Joseph's golden touch with God's presence to him.

The second passage also provides closure for the story's opening scenario. Jacob began by dwelling in Canaan (37:1); now he and his extended family ("Israel") dwell in Egypt. Furthermore, the seventeen years he spends at the end of his life with Joseph in Egypt match the length of Joseph's childhood spent with him in Canaan (37:2).⁹ At last the son he loved in Canaan is undeniably his; the promise of progeny begun in the high places has been fulfilled even in the depths of Sheol.

Chapter V--Life Is But a Dream
Or, What Are Words Worth?

No reading of Joseph's story can exclude a detailed discussion of the dreams which figure so prominently in the plot. But these dreams are no mere plot devices serving only to facilitate the action; rather, they reveal the ambiguous nature of promise-making as a form of prophecy. For though the dreams promise that future events will occur, they give no indication how such events will be brought to pass. Furthermore, unlike other patriarchal narratives which portray encounters with a walking, talking divine messenger, Joseph's story is predicated on a pair of dreams whose source is undisclosed. Not until we read through two later dream incidents (in combination with the other narrative clues already discussed) can we identify with any confidence the outcome of the initial pair, nor is the divine origin of these dreams absolutely certain until we read Jacob's dream in chapter 46.

More than Jacob's gift of clothing, Joseph's dreams set in motion his brothers' plan to do away with him. When Joseph finds them at Dothan, they privately mock him with the epithet "lord of the dreams" (ba'al hahalomot, translated much more blandly as "dreamer" in the RSV): "They said to one another, 'Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; and then we shall say that a wild beast has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams'" (37:19-20). The brothers' speech highlights the tremendous tension they feel when confronted with what may be the voice of destiny. To explore the full range of this tension, let us look closely at the way these dreams are presented:

Now Joseph had [lit. dreamed] a dream, and when he told it to his brothers they only hated him the more. He said to them, "Hear this dream which I have dreamed: behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and lo, my sheaf arose and stood upright; and behold, your sheaves gathered round it, and bowed down to my sheaf." His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to have dominion over us?" So they hated him yet more for his dreams and for his words. (37:5-8)

Then he dreamed another dream, and told it to his brothers, and said, "Behold, I have dreamed another dream; and behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me." But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him, and said to him, "What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall I and your mother and your brothers indeed come to bow ourselves to the ground before you?" And his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind. (37:9-11)

From whence do these dreams come? Elsewhere in Genesis only three dreams occur, and all three provide the context for a divine message (15:1ff.; 20:3-7; 28:12-17). But just as the stranger at Shechem is conspicuously not identified with God, so too Joseph's dreams make no reference to having a divine origin. In fact, Joseph twice boasts that "I have dreamed" (vv. 6 & 9), thus claiming the action of dreaming as his own, in contrast to the first two Genesis dreamers, Abram and Abimelech, who passively receive the vision or dream God sends to them.¹ Though the third dreamer, Jacob himself, is the subject of the verb to dream, his dream clearly comes from God, and in fact forms the context in which Jacob receives the divine promise (28:12-15). Since Abram's vision also reiterates the divine promise given to him earlier, and Abimelech's dream serves to protect that promise, we expect a connection between dreams and God's promise--a connection which, at first glance, is missing in Joseph's dreams.

Secondly, from whence do the interpretations come? Are we to

assume that Jacob and his sons have correctly deciphered dreams which are completely symbolic? Again, the three earlier dream episodes contain words spoken by God, so that even Jacob's dream, which is the only one with any visual element, centres on what God says rather than what Jacob sees. But Joseph's dreams are all about sheaves and stars bowing down to him. Granted, his first dream report describes the bowing sheaves as belonging to his brothers, symbolism which seems straightforward enough. But his second dream report does not identify the stars as belonging to anyone, even though the number eleven strongly suggests Joseph's eleven brothers. Because the number twelve can symbolize the whole world as well as the twelve tribes of Israel,² perhaps Joseph's dream means that the world will find completion in its submission to him, especially since the dream includes homage from the sun and moon. Jacob equates the sun and moon with himself and Joseph's mother--but she has been dead since Genesis 35:19. Coats explains this anomaly as a mere figure of speech; Jacob means that the whole family will bow to Joseph (p. 14). This explanation is as plausible as any other; the point is that Jacob may not really know what he is saying, nor is the dream as easily interpreted as it may first appear.³

A related question is whether or not Joseph accurately reports his dreams. Though the fact of Joseph's having dreamed is mentioned independently (vv. 5 & 9), there is no narrative confirmation of the dreams' content (in contrast to the three earlier dream episodes); we can only take his word for it (vv. 6-7, 9). That the dreams and his descriptions of them are in some way linked, either in their discrepancy or in their congruency, is emphasized by these passages' opening and closing statements. Verses 5 and 9 assign two verbs to

Joseph in rapid succession--he dreamed and he told the dream. Similarly, in verse 8 the brothers hate him "for his dreams and for his words."

Most interesting is verse 11: the brothers are described as being jealous, but Jacob "kept the saying in mind." Jacob's pondering recalls, if not for him then at least for us, his own earlier dream experience in which God chooses him (over his older brother) to receive the divine promise. But notice that it is not his son's dream which occupies his thoughts but the "saying," for it is the speech act which imbues the dreams with reality. The dreams exist in the narrative only as Joseph's words, but that existence paradoxically adds objective weight to the dreams' content even as Joseph's veracity is left unresolved.

In the Ancient Near East words were treated as far more than abstract symbols; in Hebrew the word dabar means both word and thing (or matter, event, occurrence).⁴ Once a thing was spoken it could not be unsaid, nor could its implications be avoided. Thus, words had power to call forth the events they expressed, a belief which formed the basis for the prophetic role.⁵ This explains why Isaac could not take back the blessing he inadvertently gave to his usurping son Jacob instead of to his favourite son Esau (Gen. 27:1-40; cf. esp. vv. 33 & 37). Jacob's success depended at least in part on the utterance of propitious words by his father. Now Jacob contemplates the possibility that his favourite son Joseph may have spoken his own dazzling future into being.

On one hand, Joseph may or may not be honest; on the other hand, he may or may not be prophetic, both in the sense of relaying divine

messages and also predicting and thus determining what will happen. Indeed, even English echoes the Hebrew sense of the power of utterance--consider the resonance of our word prediction. A promise is a pre-diction of an event, insofar as it makes a statement of personal intent which foretells the promise-maker's course of action; indeed, a promise is not a promise until it is expressed. Joseph's dreams are not presented as either straightforward promises or divine messages. Yet because Joseph speaks his dreams, they have the effect of prophecy, which in Genesis takes the form of promise.⁶ In Joseph's case, the promise/prophecy inherent in his dreams is much more unstable because the promise-giver is absent and unknown.

The moment the promise is spoken, its fulfillment begins. Joseph's speech act sets in motion the events leading to its realization. His brothers hate him as much for his dreams and words as for the special favour Jacob has shown him, and their plan to kill him is an attempt to sabotage what looks to be an unpleasant future for them.⁷ Ironically, the brothers' method of annulling the dreams serves instead to further their outcome, though neither Jacob's family nor the reader is given any clue of this until much later in the story. On the contrary, Joseph moves farther and farther away from his family, through circumstances which make his dreams seem less and less likely to prove true.

Let us now turn our attention to the second pair of dreams. Joseph, first a slave and now a prisoner, has been recognized as a favourite of God (39:2-5 & 21-23), though so far no connection has been made between God's presence and Joseph's dreams. Such a link comes subtly into view during the course of his service to Pharaoh's butler and baker:

And one night they both dreamed--the butler and the baker of the king of Egypt, who were confined in the prison--each his own dream, and each dream with its own meaning. When Joseph came to them in the morning and saw them, they were troubled. So he asked Pharaoh's officers who were with him in custody in his master's house, "Why are your faces downcast today?" They said to him, "We have had dreams, and there is no one to interpret them." And Joseph said to them, "Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell them to me, I pray you." (40:5-8)

Unlike the initial dreams passage, here the dreaming and the telling are separated, both in time and on the text's formal level. The men dream "one night" (40:5), but Joseph comes to them "in the morning" (40:6). Even then they do not tell their dreams immediately, but worry instead about having received messages they cannot decipher (40:6-8).⁸ By convincing Pharaoh's servants to divulge their troubling secrets, Joseph once again instigates the translation of dream into reality.

Joseph's response is fraught with significance. By identifying God as the source of interpretations, he identifies himself as God's mouthpiece. This role goes hand in hand with the narrative's emphasis on God's presence with him, but it also begins to answer our earlier question concerning Joseph's ability to prophesy. The related question of his honesty is answered indirectly, since he has nothing to gain by lying about either his interpreting skill or the interpretations themselves. But Joseph's comment also affects our uncertainty about his brothers' and father's interpretations. If Joseph is correct about God's role in the interpreting process, then Jacob and his other sons have also spoken a word from God, and the act of interpreting has a part in determining the future as well. Thus, dreaming, telling, and interpreting are all aspects of promise-making. Certainly the emphasis on interpreting as a divine activity heightens our expectations of the story's positive outcome promised earlier by the interpretations of Joseph's dreams.

The butler and the baker both dream on the same night, "each his own dream, and each dream with its own meaning" (40:5). Because the dreams are simultaneous and their meanings are so thematically similar, they function as binary opposites, representing two possible outcomes. The butler dreams that a three-branched vine has produced grapes which he then squeezes into Pharaoh's cup (40:9-11), whereas the baker dreams that birds eat baked food intended for Pharaoh from a stack of three baskets the baker wears on his head (40:16-17).⁹ Joseph's interpretations reveal the extent to which one dream is a mirror of the other:

Then Joseph said to him, "This is its interpretation: the three branches are three days; within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your office; and you shall place Pharaoh's cup in his hand as formerly, when you were his butler." (40:12-13)

And Joseph answered, "This is its interpretation: the three baskets are three days; within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head--from you!--and hang you on a tree; and the birds will eat the flesh from you." (40:18-19)

The two possibilities--life or death--apply to Pharaoh's servants, but they also suggest the alternatives facing Joseph. He, too, has "offended" his lord (cf. 40:1) and now awaits sentencing. Will he be restored to his former position or will he be killed? Because of the equal weight placed on both positive and negative outcomes, these dreams tighten the tension of the unfulfilled promise in Joseph's dreams. (Later, the same tension will be brought to bear on Joseph's brothers, who will also remain in prison for three days. How will Joseph, as Pharaoh's deputy, treat them? Will they be "lifted up" and allowed to bring food to their father, as the butler places Pharaoh's cup in his hand? Or will they have their heads "lifted up" from them,

as the hapless baker who can no longer provide bread? Ironically, before all is resolved, they will be accused of taking the cup out of Joseph's hand.)

The tension about Joseph's fate is eased temporarily by the events which follow. Though the narrative has slowed down between the servants' dreaming and telling, it moves immediately from Joseph's interpretations to their fulfillment, using his language to describe what happens, and ending with the significant statement that all had come to pass exactly as Joseph had said:

On the third day, which was Pharaoh's birthday, he made a feast for all his servants, and lifted up the head of the chief butler and the head of the chief baker among his servants. He restored the chief butler to his butlership, and he placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand; but he hanged the chief baker, as Joseph had interpreted to them. (40:20-22; my emphasis)

Suddenly the promise in Joseph's dreams appears much less ambiguous (cf. Seybold, 64-65). Joseph's words concerning dreams, at least in this case, have proven to be both honest and prophetic. Though it is still possible that Joseph was dishonest or mistaken in his youth, the circumstances of his life, including God's presence with him in Egypt, suggest that he is destined for leadership in one form or another. Furthermore, we expect an imminent change in Joseph's fortune, because he has asked the reprieved butler to put in a good word for him with Pharaoh (40:14-15). Yet what seems to be the turning point of the story is arrested by one laconic statement which follows on the heels of Joseph's triumph: "the chief butler did not remember Joseph, but forgot him" (40:23). The promise offered at the story's beginning, ostensibly confirmed by the fulfillment of the servants' dreams, is snatched away. Just as Jacob cannot buy his family's

survival, so too Joseph cannot trade on his interpretive skill to secure his freedom. Thus we are left, dangling and wondering on this narrative hook, while Joseph remains forgotten in prison.

The very next verse tantalizes us with the possibility of change: "After two whole years, Pharaoh dreamed . . ." (41:1), one dream about seven fat cows being swallowed by seven gaunt cows, and a second dream about seven fat grain heads being devoured by seven blighted ones. Pharaoh's dreams exist independently of their being spoken, for vv. 1-7 describe them as they are being dreamed. Here the gap between the dreaming and the telling is the same as that for Pharaoh's servants-- "in the morning" Pharaoh "sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt" and "told them his dream" (41:8)--but the interpretation is delayed for lack of a competent interpreter. This is the moment we have been waiting for. The chief butler remembers Joseph's ability and tells Pharaoh that the "young Hebrew" has correctly interpreted not one but two dreams (41:9-13), indicating that Joseph's skill is not a fluke. Joseph is rushed from prison into Pharaoh's presence, and now we will see how this "lord of the dreams" will acquit himself: "And Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'I have had a dream, and there is no one who can interpret it; and I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it.' Joseph answered Pharaoh, 'It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer' (41:15-16).

Again Joseph makes a direct connection between his interpretive skill and God's presence with him. Indeed, Joseph's interpretations now place an enormous emphasis on dreams being divine communiques. Much of what he tells Pharaoh also applies to his own dreams:

Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, "The dream of Pharaoh is one; God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do."

The seven good cows are seven years, and the seven good ears are seven years; the dream is one. The seven lean and gaunt cows that came up after them are seven years, and the seven empty ears blighted by the east wind are also seven years of famine. It is as I told Pharaoh, God has shown to Pharaoh what he is about to do. There will come seven years of great plenty throughout all the land of Egypt, but after them there will arise seven years of famine, and all the plenty will be forgotten in the land of Egypt; the famine will consume the land, and the plenty will be unknown in the land by reason of that famine which will follow, for it will be very grievous. And the doubling of Pharaoh's dream means that the thing is fixed by God, and God will shortly bring it to pass. (41:25-32; my emphasis)

Joseph's dreams, too, "are one," and "the doubling" of them presumably means that they represent something that is also "fixed by God." We wonder, though, about how "shortly" they will be brought "to pass," since we have already waited a long time to receive even this much confirmation of them. Furthermore, though "God has shown to Pharaoh what he is about to do," it is difficult to imagine how God will orchestrate Joseph's triumph over his family.

Joseph does not stop at interpreting Pharaoh's dreams, but has the audacity to suggest a course of action to cope with coming famine, thereby showing him complete confidence in being God's chosen (because to tell Pharaoh what to do must certainly be a risky business). Pharaoh's response not only wryly echoes Joseph's instructions, but also acknowledges God's presence with him (41:38-39), a relationship which both Potiphar and the prisonkeeper have also recognized--though Jacob and his sons have not. By selecting the "discreet and wise" Joseph to administer the gathering and rationing of Egypt's grain, Pharaoh places Joseph in a position similar to that predicted by Joseph's dreams; he will become lord of the sheaves, and eventually the whole world will come to him for its survival.

Furthermore, this ba'al bahalomot will function in the role of the Canaanite ba'al, the god of weather and fertility, under the benevolent jurisdiction of the sovereign God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.¹⁰ Appropriately, Pharaoh gives Joseph an Egyptian wife who is the daughter of a priest at On (Heliopolis), the centre for worship of the Egyptian sun god Re (4:45).¹¹ During the fertile years, two sons are born to them (41:50), whose names Manasseh and Ephraim, as we have already noted, mean "making to forget" and "to be fruitful" (41:51-52; according to margin notes in RSV). Unlike the Egyptians who will forget the seven years of plenty because the famine will be so terrible, Joseph has forgotten "all [his] hardship and all [his] father's house" (41:51), and has become "fruitful in the land of [his] affliction" (41:52), even though it is not the household in which he had thought to gain power, nor the land promised by God to Joseph's ancestors.

His mention of his father's house, of course, turns our attention to Jacob's family, who soon come before Joseph and bow down to him as the lord of the grain (42:6). When Joseph recognizes them he remembers "the dreams which he had dreamed of them" (42:9), for surely here is the fulfillment of his sheaf dream.¹² That God has had a hand in the events of Joseph's life, and therefore is the source of his dreams, becomes the focus of Joseph's reconciliation with his brothers after they admit their guilt; Joseph attributes his authority to God four times in five verses (45:5-9).

But though the eleven stars are now prostrate before him, Joseph has yet to receive homage from his father in fulfillment of the sun and moon bowing to him. When Jacob finally learns of his son's prestigious

position, he experiences a minor death ("his heart fainted"--45:26), but then resolves to "go and see him before I die" (45:28), a subtle amendment to his earlier avowal to go down to Sheol to his son. By obeying his son's summons instead of waiting for his son to come to him, Jacob is actually submitting to Joseph, albeit happily. He is also verifying his own interpretation of Joseph's dream--he has "indeed come" (37:10). Furthermore, Jacob will turn over his position as family provider to Joseph (45:11; 47:11-12). (Characteristically, Jacob disregards Pharaoh's instruction to "give no thought to [his] goods"--45:20--but instead journeys "with all that he had"--46:1. Jacob may be ready to bow to his favourite son, but he refuses to submit to Pharaoh by accepting favours. Later in his audience with Pharaoh, Jacob blesses him, as befits the dignity of an elderly foreign leader. There is no mention of either Jacob or any of his sons bowing to Pharaoh. See 41:14, 47:10-10.) As in his younger days at the Jabbok, once again Jacob learns the identity of his adversary (Joseph, as the once-ominous Prime Minister), only to discover that he has unwittingly struggled against a benefactor. Little wonder that he seeks assurance from God concerning this highly unorthodox journey.

Furthermore, Jacob has not received confirmation of Joseph's special relationship with God as we have. To leave the land of promise without divine guidance is a serious matter, and so Jacob offers sacrifices to God while he is yet within Canaan's borders (46:1). For once God is amenable to coming when he is called, and Jacob receives the story's final dream:

And God spoke to Israel in visions of the night, and said, "Jacob, Jacob." And he said, "Here am I." Then he said, "I am God, the God of your father; do not be afraid to go down to Egypt; for I will there make of you a great

nation. I will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again; and Joseph's hand shall close your eyes." (46:2-4)

Here at last is a dream to be taken at face value. The source of the dream is clearly identified; the dream consists only of God's words, with no visual symbols confusing the issue. The dream is a straightforward promise that God, not Ba'al or Re but the God of Isaac, will not renege on his earlier promise to Jacob concerning progeny, land, and special relationship--a promise originally set before Jacob in the form of a dream (Gen. 28:12-15). In Egypt Jacob's descendants will become "a great nation," and God will accompany Jacob there and "bring [him] up again," so that the land of promise will be his ultimate destination after all. Notice the implication that both Jacob and Joseph will return to Canaan before Jacob's death. Since this the last dream promise occurs so near the story's end, we assume it will be fulfilled quickly. The passage which seems to draw everything to a satisfactory close tells us that "Israel dwelt in the land of Egypt, in the land of Goshen; and they gained possessions in it, and were fruitful and multiplied exceedingly" (47:27), thus fulfilling the progeny promise in Jacob's dream. We have already seen how Jacob's family enjoys certain privileges because Joseph takes care of them; as God's representative, Joseph thus fulfills the promise of special relationship. But the promise that Jacob will return to Canaan remains unfulfilled until the story's epilogue, in which God's seemingly unambiguous words receive an unexpected twist. Once again, promise lures us into reading just a little further.

Epilogue--The End?

"An epilogue," Garp wrote, "is more than a body count. An epilogue, in the disguise of wrapping up the past, is really a way of warning us about the future."

John Irving, The World According to Garp

Throughout Joseph's story God's threefold promise to Abraham, to Isaac, and then to Jacob has wound a subtle path. Genesis 37 opened with statements which placed the story in the context of other promise stories, and then teased us further by deliberately subverting those stories through use of a journey sequence and the "encounter with the omniscient questioner" pattern. By the time Joseph arrived in Egypt, we were completely uncertain about the story's outcome, including whether or not God's promise had any role to play in the narrative. Section II suddenly introduced God as an active agent who remained with Joseph through each of his metaphorical deaths and rebirths, represented by the pit, Potiphar's house, the prison, and Pharaoh's house. We saw that through Joseph's descent into Sheol/Egypt, that land became the locus of the world's survival, while the land of promise languished. Joseph's investiture as Pharaoh's deputy confirmed God's promise of special relationship to Joseph, though Jacob remained unaware of that fulfillment.

But in section III Jacob did receive confirmation of another element of the divine promise--progeny. Though Jacob was unable to buy his family's survival with kesepeh, Judah's original transaction with kesepeh finally paid off, and the missing Joseph reappeared to provide for Jacob's entire family. Then, because Joseph's dreams were gradually revealed as God's word, and because Jacob himself received confirmation that God would go with him into Egypt, we saw that God's

promise of special relationship was fulfilled for Jacob as well as Joseph.

Joseph's story began, in Todorov's terms, by describing a state of disequilibrium within Jacob's family, then passing through successively new states of disequilibrium until it culminated in a state of equilibrium--in Coats' words, "Jacob in Canaan, Israel in Egypt" (p 9). Though Jacob's dream is left unfulfilled, the story is essentially finished, and yet. . . . What is missing is fulfillment of the land promise. Though Jacob has received the choicest land in Egypt (47:11), God's promise specified Canaan as the patriarchal destination. If not for the terms stated in Jacob's dream, we might be content to let the land element slip by; the story "feels" finished, and everyone is happy. Why not let the land element be fulfilled in a subsequent story?

We are not to be let off the hook. God has made a promise that he will "go down" with Jacob to Egypt and will also bring Jacob back to Canaan, "and Joseph's hand shall close [his] eyes" (46:4). This promise extends beyond what seems to be the end of the story--"And Jacob lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years; so the days of Jacob, the years of his life, were a hundred and forty-seven years" (47:28). Since "the years of his life" are seemingly brought to a close in Egypt, we wonder what to expect from God's promise to bring Jacob "up again." How will this come to pass? Jacob's dream demands an epilogue to satisfy our newly-raised curiosity.

The epilogue begins with three promises. Jacob essentially asks his son to serve as God's deputy one more time in order to ensure that he will indeed return to Canaan; he makes Joseph promise to "carry

[him] out of Egypt" and bury him with his "fathers . . . in their burying place" (47:30). Immediately we wonder whether Jacob's death will signal Joseph's permanent return to Canaan, and if this funeral will complete the journey begun in Joseph's youth, a journey which paralleled Abraham's, at least in part. Since Abraham's travels from Shechem to Egypt to Hebron have been echoed in Joseph's itinerary, and Abraham then returns to Hebron after his second journey to purchase land for Sarah's burial, we now look for Joseph to come full circle and return to Hebron as well.

Upon receiving Joseph's oath concerning his burial, Jacob puts his other affairs in order. When Joseph comes to make his farewell, Jacob reiterates God's promise, passed down from Abraham and Isaac, and now, apparently, to Joseph: "Behold, I will make you fruitful, and multiply you, and I will make of you a company of peoples, and will give this land to your descendants after you for an everlasting possession" (48:4). Once again Jacob attributes this promise to El Shaddai (48:3), the Mountain One, a detail which recalls Jacob's earlier capitulation to the mysterious workings of destiny, but which also strengthens the contrast between his present location in the lowlands of Egypt and his desired resting place in the hills of Canaan. After having received both Joseph's promise and God's promise, Jacob is ready to make his own promise--to adopt Joseph's sons as his own first-born sons (they will be "as Reuben and Simeon are," 48:5), because they are the continuation of Rachel's life which ended in mid-journey so many years ago (48:7).

The seeming awkwardness of the subsequent passage is usually blamed on an abrupt shift from one source to another (cf. von Rad, 406ff.), but if we recall the omniscient questioner pattern, the text

makes more sense. Jacob has just promised to adopt Ephraim and Manasseh, but now he asks Joseph to identify his sons (48:8). Rather than ignoring the verses before it, his question, "Who are these?" places the adoption proceedings in the formal context of a change in a significant relationship, precisely the function of the encounter with the omniscient questioner. Jacob, like the wrestler at the Jabbok, asks for a statement of relationship in preparation for a renaming. Joseph's response is appropriately profound: "They are my sons, whom God has given me here" (48:9). Though God's promise of progeny has been confirmed for Jacob earlier in the story, Joseph now recognizes himself as a recipient of that element. Just as the encounter with the omniscient questioner signals a fulfillment of promise, the adoption ritual acknowledges that the elements of special relationship and progeny have been fulfilled for both Jacob and Joseph.

Jacob's blessing of Ephraim over Manasseh has long been recognized as a parallel to Isaac's blessing of Jacob over Esau (cf. von Rad, 411). Jacob's eyes, like Isaac's, are "dim" (48:10), and the crossing of his hands ensures that the younger Ephraim will receive the blessing normally reserved for the first-born (48:14). That Joseph tries to intervene on his older son's behalf raises a smile--this is the eleventh son, whose dreams of dominance so provoked his father in Gen. 37! Furthermore, that father had himself usurped his older brother's position. Jacob's affectionate though adamant, "I know, my son, I know," reveals the depth of his hard-won wisdom, and also places him in the role of the omniscient questioner, even though "he could not see" (48:10). As Ackerman puts it, "Jacob sees--that his god has firm and knowable purposes that are nevertheless brought to fruition in

paradoxical and surprising ways" ("JJJ," 109).

After articulating his faith in God's promise of relationship and progeny (48:15-16, 19), Jacob expresses his favouritism toward Joseph in the same way he introduced it in Gen. 37--with a gift. Just as Jacob's blessing of Ephraim (48:19) reflects God's promise in the Beersheba dream to make him "a great nation" (46:3), so Jacob's gift to Joseph reflects God's promise to "bring [him] up again" (46:4): "Then Israel said to Joseph, 'Behold, I am about to die, but God will be with you, and will bring you again to the land of your fathers. Moreover, I have given to you rather than to your brothers one mountain slope which I took from the hand of the Amorites with my sword and with my bow'" (48:21-22). The gift of the mountain slope signifies God's promise to bring Joseph back to Canaan, but it does several other things as well.

First, the Hebrew for "mountain slope" is shechem, or "shoulder." The Jerusalem Bible has this to say about Jacob's word choice: "Jacob parcels out the Holy Land just as a paterfamilias, or the presiding personage, assigns the portions in a sacrificial banquet, 1 S 1:4f., the shoulder being one of the choicest parts . . ." ¹ Once again, Jacob singles out Joseph for preferential treatment, though now we have the sense that he knows exactly what he is doing, in contrast to his tragic foolishness in giving young Joseph the fateful coat. Secondly, the mountain slope's height stands in symbolic opposition to the Canaanite pit, where Jacob's first gift parted company with its recipient. Joseph is to retain permanent possession this time, though there is always the possibility that this gift too will attract a fight (Jacob has had to violently wrest it from the Amorites). Though Jacob can give a gift, it is up to Joseph to keep it. ² Thirdly, by giving

this shechem to Joseph, Jacob marks it as at least one of Joseph's destinations. Jacob has sent Joseph to Shechem before; whether or not this shechem is that city is irrelevant; the wordplay is enough to remind us again of Joseph's journey.

Jacob then gathers his sons at his deathbed to prophesy about their individual destinies (49:1-28). Though this poem looks forward to the histories of the twelve tribes (cf. vonRad, 416-23, 429), it also uses imagery that hearkens back to the events of Joseph's story.³ Especially interesting is Jacob's prediction for Judah (49:8-12). Like Joseph before him, Judah will receive homage from his brothers, who will "bow down before" him (v.8). Judah is then described as "a lion's whelp" who has "gone up" from its "prey" (v.9). Certainly Judah has risen morally since his crime against his "prey" Joseph, and Jacob's next lines describe how this has happened: Judah "stooped down, he couched as a lion,/ and as a lioness; who dares rouse him up?" Judah has shown himself to have a lion's courage by "stooping down"--when he offered to be Joseph's slave in return for his father's peace of mind. The word "couched" has a sexual connotation, especially followed by mention of the lioness, but this image of procreation is appropriate, since Judah's self-humiliation has served to protect Jacob's progeny.

Verse 10 continues the sexual metaphor (and also alludes to Judah's story in Gen. 38--see Ackerman, "JJJ," 111), promising that Judah's own progeny will hold sway over "the peoples." Finally, Judah will enjoy such abundant fertility and prosperity that he will wash his garments, not in the blood of goats, but in the "blood of grapes," and will tie "his ass's colt to the choice vine" without worrying that the vine will surely be eaten (cf. von Rad, 425; Ackerman, ibid.). But

Judah is bound to the vine already. As the preserver of Jacob's family, he has allied himself with the butler's destiny, rather than the baker's. The imagery of freeflowing wine reminds us that the butler was restored to his position after his dream of squeezing grapes into Pharaoh's cup. Just as the dream promised life to the butler, so Jacob's poem promises a rich future to Judah. Because he has preserved life, he will enjoy plenty.

Joseph, too, is pictured as being on the side of life and plenty. He is "a fruitful bough by a spring" whose "branches run over the wall" (49:22). Though he was once imprisoned in a dry cistern, he now flourishes near a never-failing source of sustenance which enables him to break free of the constraints imposed by his oppressors. Though "archers fiercely attacked him" (v. 23), Joseph has remained steadfast and unconquered by his enemies, brothers or otherwise, because of his special relationship with the God of Jacob (v. 24), El Shaddai (v. 25). Joseph the preserver of life will enjoy the blessings of progeny (v. 25) and the "bounties of the everlasting hills" beyond which he had once been "separate from his brothers" (v. 26). Thus, metaphorically the three elements of the divine promise are here passed on to Joseph.⁴

Now that Jacob has redefined his sons' identities in terms of their futures, he commands his sons to bury him "in the cave that is in the field at Mach-pelah, to the east of Mamre, in the land of Canaan, which Abraham bought with the field from Ephron the Hittite to possess as a burying place" (49:30). This time he does not exact a promise but "charges" them to do this (v.29), acting out the role of the omniscient questioner by providing the impetus for them to embark on a journey. The details of this journey will remind us of several key events and

motifs relating to the workings of promise within Joseph's story.

Upon Jacob's death, Joseph prepares for the long journey to Canaan by having his father's body embalmed (50:2). Spices used in this process had accompanied both Joseph and Benjamin in their descent to Egypt (37:25, 43:11); therefore, we are given a clue that this journey will be a reversal of the earlier two. Immediately after the young Joseph's disappearance in Gen. 37, his brothers had deceived their father by sending a messenger with "proof" of Joseph's death (37:32). Later, Joseph had deceived his brothers by sending his steward to accuse them of stealing his silver cup (44:4). Now Joseph sends, through members of Pharaoh's household (50:4), a message to Pharaoh which contains at least one untruthful statement: "My father made me swear, saying, 'I am about to die: in my tomb which I hewed out for myself in the land of Canaan, there shall you bury me.' Now therefore let me go up, I pray you, and bury my father; then I will return" (50:5; my emphasis). This incident occurs in exactly the same sequence as the two other message-sendings, just as a journey is about to get under way. In the first instance, the deception ensures that Jacob will not interfere with Joseph's trip to Egypt, whereas the deception in the second case interrupts the brothers' return from Egypt. We might speculate that Joseph's lie to Pharaoh concerning the origin of Jacob's tomb is politically expedient, since the tomb's true history reflects a clannish pride that Pharaoh may well find offensive or even threatening.⁵ Certainly Joseph's intent is to ensure that Pharaoh will not interfere with his journey out of Egypt. But his lie raises the question of his trustworthiness regarding his promise to return. If Jacob's burial is to be the occasion for the reversal of the two

earlier "burials," then why should he agree to re-enter Sheol?

The fact that Joseph will keep his promise to Pharaoh, in spite of his small deception, suggests itself immediately in the description of Jacob's funeral cortege, for Joseph takes with him "all the servants of Pharaoh, the elders of his household, and all the elders of the land of Egypt" (50:7), while leaving behind the children and flocks belonging to the sons of Jacob (v.8). Yet despite Joseph's promised return, this journey prefigures the Exodus story, with its petition to Pharaoh, the movement from Egypt of "a very great company" which ironically includes "both chariots and horsemen" (v.9), and the lamentation of the company on the east side of the Jordan River (vv.10-11). This, then, is the reason Joseph can return to Egypt: the ultimate completion of his journey is projected into the future.

By burying Jacob at Hebron, Joseph fulfills God's promise to "bring [Jacob] up again." Now the land element is fulfilled for Jacob, though Joseph receives only the intimation of its fulfillment. Nevertheless, Joseph has come full circle, as far as the narrative is concerned:

Jacob and Joseph live at Hebron (37:14);
 Jacob sends Joseph to Shechem (37:13-14);
 Joseph encounters an omniscient questioner (37:15-17);
 Joseph is exiled into Egypt (37:28ff.);
 Jacob acts as Joseph's omniscient questioner (48:8ff.);
 Jacob "sends" Joseph to shechem (48:22);
 Joseph buries Jacob at Hebron (50:13).

And through it all, Joseph has been accompanied and guided by El Shaddai, the God of the mountain slope/shechem who has descended with Joseph into Sheol and who promises to bring him up again (48:21). (The story's persistent emphasis on shechem and El Shaddai suggests a link between the mountain and the Mountain God; in Gen. 37 we expected God

to appear to Joseph at Shechem because of its history as a place of epiphany--and maybe he did, disguised as the stranger.) Therefore, Joseph keeps his promise to Pharaoh on the strength of his faith in this God's promises to him.

His brothers, however, are still uncertain of Joseph's trustworthiness. Fearing his delayed vengeance, they employ the same type of deception Joseph has practiced on Pharaoh:

. . . they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this command before he died, 'Say to Joseph, Forgive, I pray you, the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.' And now, we pray you, forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father" (50:16-17).

Since the narrative has carefully placed Joseph almost constantly at the side of his dying father, the brothers' invention of Jacob's command is naively transparent. Yet their words also carry truth. They really do want Joseph's forgiveness, and they make no excuses for why they need it. Though the message begins with the so-called command of Jacob, it concludes with the brothers' own heartfelt request, based on their dependancy on Jacob's special relationship with God.

It is this acknowledgement which Joseph picks up in his reply: "Fear not, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones" (50:19-21). Joseph astutely points out that his brothers have indeed acted as God's servants, albeit unwittingly, when they caused his descent into Egypt. Since God used their crime as a means for ensuring the world's survival, Joseph has no reason or right to effect his own brand of justice. Gone are the days of paying for survival. The brothers' request is for Joseph

to wipe out their moral debt to him. But God has already done so, by transforming the land of death into a place of preservation.

And so the story ends the way it started, with a statement that reconciliation has occurred between brothers: "So Joseph dwelt in Egypt, he and his father's house; and Joseph lived a hundred and ten years" (50:22). We recall Jacob's dwelling both in Canaan (37:1) and in Egypt until his death at the age of one hundred and forty-seven (47:27-28). Like Jacob who enjoyed the fulfillment of the progeny promise in his old age, Joseph too "[sees] Ephraim's children of the third generation," and Manasseh's grandchildren are "born upon Joseph's knees" (50:23--the phrase means that Joseph adopts them; cf. von Rad, 410).

Yet also like his father before him, Joseph's death leaves the promise of land unfulfilled.⁶ On his deathbed he passes that promise on to his brothers (or presumably their children), together with the assurance that God will be present to all of them as descendants of the first recipients of the promise (v.24). Then Joseph predicts that he too will receive God's promise of land (v.25), and because all other promises and predictions in this story have been fulfilled, we have no reason to doubt him. Though he dies, is embalmed, and is put in a coffin, he is not buried (v.26). We know that his final resting place is not to be Sheol, for when the sons of Israel are brought "up out of this land" by God (v.24), Joseph too will find his rest in Canaan.

Notes for Introduction

1 Seymour Chatman, "Towards a Theory of Narrative," New Literary History 6 (Winter 1975), 295. Journal abbreviated as NLH.

2 The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard UP, 1979), 64-65.

3 "Word Reception as the Matrix of the Structure of the Genesis Narrative," The Biblical Mosaic: Changing Perspectives, ed. Robert M. Polzin and Eugene Rothman, Society of Biblical Literature: Semeia Studies (Phila: Fortress; Chico, Ca: Scholars, 1982), 77.

4 The Theme of the Pentateuch, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Series 10 (1978; Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1982), 29.

5 Cf. recent works by Robert C. Culley, Robert M. Polzin and many contributors to the journal Semeia, among others.

6 Cf. Norman Habel, Literary Criticism of the Old Testament, Guides to Biblical Scholarship: Old Testament Series, ed. J. Coert Rylaarsdam (Phila: Fortress Press, 1971).

7 "Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response in Prose Fiction," Aspects of Narrative (NY & London: Columbia UP, 1971), 1-45. Though my argument never directly refers to Iser, his ideas form much of the basis for my discussion of the reader's interaction with the text.

8 (NY: Basic Books, 1981). Abbreviated as Art.

Notes for Chapter I

1 According to some scholars, v. 1 is really the conclusion to the previous story about Jacob and Esau, so that Joseph's story begins with the second statement. Cf. Gerhard von Rad, Genesis: A Commentary, trans. John H. Marks (Phila: Westminster, 1961), 341 & 344-45; Bruce Vawter, On Genesis: A New Reading (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), 379. However, George W. Coats argues convincingly that v. 1 forms "an exact parallel with the closing sentence of the Joseph story," which he identifies as 47:27a. See his monograph From Canaan to Egypt: Structural and Theological Context for the Joseph Story, CBQMS 4 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Assoc. of America, 1976), esp. 8-11. I disagree with his assertion that 47:27a is the end of Joseph's story, for reasons I will discuss in my chapter 5 and epilogue.

2 Coats bases his reading of the story on this move, noting that the parallel between 37:1 and 47:27a "suggests, moreover, a structural dialectic in the Joseph story itself. The scope of the story, according to the opening and closing sentences, ranges from Jacob in Canaan to Israel in Egypt" (p. 9). Coats therefore identifies Jacob's move from Canaan to Egypt as "the principal structural focus in the story's plot" (p. 19), and he briefly mentions the importance of changes in physical location as indicators of structural movement (p. 15, n. 18).

3 Though the verse in question calls Jacob by his new name Israel, the bulk of Gen. 37-50 refers to him as Jacob. I have chosen to simplify matters by using the name Jacob throughout my argument; similarly, I will use Abraham rather than Abram, and God rather than the Lord, Yahweh, or Elohim. Though much could be done by studying the narrative's use of alternate names, such exploration is beyond the scope of this essay.

4 Gerald Blidstein, Honor Thy Father and Mother: Filial Responsibility in Jewish Law and Ethics, The Library of Jewish Law and Ethics (NY: KTAV Publishing, 1975), 47-50.

5 "The Grammar of Narrative," in The Poetics of Prose, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1977), 111.

6 Michael Paul DeRoche, "The Dynamics of Promise: Narrative Logic in the Abraham Story," PhD. thesis, McMaster Univ., 1986, p. 66. I am deeply grateful to Mr. DeRoche for sending me an early draft of his third chapter, "The Structure of the Story's Plot," in summer 1985, and for alerting me to the work of George Coats and Robert Alter. Though Mr. DeRoche's discipline is biblical studies while mine is literary criticism, our approaches are very similar in many respects, and my work is indebted to his meticulous scholarship and generosity in sharing ideas.

7 Biblical scholars have difficulties accounting for this episode without resorting to source theories. Coats, for example, lamely explains that this meeting "functions simply as a delay in the pace of action, a stylistic retardation to build anticipation for Joseph's confrontation with his brothers" (p. 16).

8 Dr. Waldemar Janzen recently pointed out to me that Hagar's two encounters in the wilderness (Gen. 16:7-14; 21:15-19) also fit this pattern. It is possible that the pattern constitutes what Robert Alter has dubbed a "type-scene" (Art, 50f.), but I am not entirely certain how to apply this concept with Alter's precision.

9 This passage bears signs of a type-scene which Alter has labelled "the annunciation . . . of the birth of the hero to his barren mother" (p. 51). The interweaving of two different patterns here accounts for many differences between this encounter and the others cited. The story of Lot's flight from Sodom in Gen. 19 contains many parallels to Gen. 18, which should not be surprising, since Lot functions as Abraham's foil (cf. DeRoche, 70 & 86-87). The birth of sons to Lot's daughters at the end of Gen. 19 can be read as a parody or even a perversion of the promise made to Sarah in Gen. 18.

10 "That this station constitutes the starting point of an excursion is indicated by 20:1a, which states that Abraham 'journeyed from there towards the land of the Negeb . . .'" (DeRoche, 78). DeRoche then explains that this second journey "constitutes a reversal" but also "a continuation and fulfillment of the first" (p. 83).

11 The midrashic commentator Nahmanides interprets the Shechem encounter in terms of Joseph's faithfulness as a son: "Scripture tells this entire tale to show that though Joseph had good cause to turn back, he suffered it all for the honor of his father" (quoted by Blidstein, p. 52). This reading is certainly not incompatible with mine; indeed, it adds another layer of character complexity, since it multiplies Joseph's motivations.

12 Citing certain rabbinic interpretations, Nehama Leibowitz argues that the man at Shechem is a divine messenger. See her Studies in Bereshit (Genesis): In the Context of Ancient and Modern Jewish Bible Commentary, trans. Aryeh Newman (1972; Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1976), 395-6.

13 Interestingly, Joseph's metaphorical descent is reflected in Canaan's actual topography: Hebron is close to an unnamed mountain of 3,310 ft. in the hill country of Judah, while Shechem is between Mt. Ebal (3,083 ft.) and Mt. Gerazim (2,889 ft.). Dothan, however, is below the 1,000 ft. altitude. See Herbert G. May, The Oxford Bible Atlas, 2nd ed. (London, NY, Toronto: Oxford UP, 1974), 48-9.

14 John Joseph Owens, Analytical Key to the Old Testament: Genesis (San Francisco: Harper and Row; Toronto: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1978), 221.

15 My basis for this reading was suggested by Coats (p. 18); later I discovered that Alter and James S. Ackerman also see a descent motif in Joseph's story. See Alter, "A Literary Approach to the Bible," Commentary 60 (Dec. 1975), 74; Ackerman, "Joseph, Judah, and Jacob," Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives, Volume II, ed. Kenneth R.R. Gros Louis, with James S. Ackerman (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), 106. Subsequently cited as "LA," and "JJJ," respectively.

Notes for Chapter II

1 J.A. Emerton, "Judah and Tamar," Vetus Testamentum 29 (Oct. 1979), 410f. Emerton discusses the story's Canaanite origin, but the "trickster" appellation is mine. For a fascinating study of the way trickster stories (like this one) depend on repetition of "patterned image sets," see Harold Scheub, "Oral Narrative Process and the Use of Models," NLH 6 (Winter 1975), 353-77, especially 364-68.

2 Von Rad writes, "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" (p. 356). E.A. Speiser makes a virtually identical assessment: "The narrative is a completely independent unit. It has no connection with the drama of Joseph, which it interrupts at the conclusion of Act I" (Genesis, The Anchor Bible Series, Vol. 1 [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964], 299).

3 Tzvetan Todorov, The Poetics of Prose, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1977), 114.

4 Susan Niditch, "The Wronged Woman Righted: An Analysis of Genesis 38," The Harvard Theological Review 72, No. 1 (1979), 144-45.

5 Roland de Vaux offers a more male-oriented interpretation of the Levirate than does Susan Niditch in his Ancient Israel, Volume 1: Social Institutions (NY and Toronto: McGraw Hill, 1965): "The essential purpose (of the Old Testament Levirate) is to perpetuate male descent, [sic.] the 'name,' the 'house,' and therefore the child (probably only the first child) of a Levirate marriage was considered the child of the deceased man. It was not mere sentiment, but an expression of the importance attached to blood ties" (p. 38).

6 Todorov, p. 111. Todorov explains why he omits nouns in his narrative grammar by pointing out the descriptive qualities of the substantive: "In the Decameron, substantives are almost always reduced to an adjective; thus 'gentleman' (II,6; II,8; III,9), 'king' (X,6; X,7), and 'angel' (IV,2) all reflect a single property, which is 'to be well born'" (pp. 111-12).

7 Judah Goldin, "The Youngest Son Or Where Does Genesis 38 Belong?", The Journal of Biblical Literature 96, No. 1 (1977), 27-44. Alter, too, argues that Judah has been "taken in by a piece of attire, as his father was, learning through his own obstreperous flesh that the divinely appointed process of election cannot be thwarted by human will or social convention" ("LA," 76).

8 "This could be considered only a half measure, for only one who was really a widow [ie. who was without recourse to a Levirate marriage] returned to her father's family (Ruth 1:8ff.; Lev. 22:13). Judah's wrong lay in considering this solution as really final for himself but in presenting it to Tamar as an interim solution" (von Rad, 358).

9 It is tempting to read "your staff that is in your hand" (v.18) as a euphemism for Judah's phallus, but my own limited knowledge of Hebrew makes me distrust my reading, even though "staff" would be an obvious phallic symbol in English. However, Ackerman notes that Judah's staff in 49:10 has a sexual connotation because of its being "between his feet" (a widely recognized Old Testament sexual euphemism). Though two different Hebrew words for staff are used in Gen. 38 and 49, they "occur in poetic parallelism in Isa. 14:5 and Ezek. 19:11, 14" ("JJJ," p. 111 and n. 30).

10 Von Rad seems to have missed the significance of this birth, for though he acknowledges that Judah "again considered [Tamar] as daughter-in-law," he finds the ending to be "somewhat unsatisfactory. Is v. 30 its conclusion at all? Strangely it concludes without telling whose wife Tamar finally became" (p. 361).

11 Alter reads the entire Joseph narrative's central theme as not-knowing/not-recognizing versus knowing/recognizing, based in part on the recurrence of Hebrew words related to nkr, "recognize" ("LA," 74, 76; and "Joseph and His Brothers," Commentary 70 [Nov. 1980], 61ff.). See also Ackerman, "JJJ," 89-90.

Notes for Chapter III

1 Many of my ideas in this chapter parallel those in Donald A. Seybold's article "Paradox and Symmetry in the Joseph Narrative," Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives, ed. Kenneth R.R. Gros Louis, with James S. Ackerman and Thayer Warshaw (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974), 59-73. Since I read this work while preparing an essay on the Judah and Tamar story a year before choosing my thesis topic, I find it impossible to sort out which ideas I developed from Seybold's and which ones I discovered independently. Therefore, I will not attempt to note every parallel between his work and mine; rather, I would advise reading all of Seybold's article.

2 In Hebrew this is a particle which means "in, towards, in the direction of." I am grateful to Dr. Waldemar Janzen for correcting my earlier misreading.

3 Claus Westermann analyzes each of the three prepositional phrases in 40:3 as follows: "in custody" refers not to a place but to "a situation, detention The place of detention is 'the house of the chief of the guard' (39:2), made more precise by אֶל-בֵּית הַסֹּהָר, 'in the prison building'" (Genesis 37-50: A Commentary, trans. John J. Scullion S.J. [Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986], 74). Thus Pharaoh's servants, like Joseph, are detained in the prison building located on the property of the captain of the guard, earlier named as Potiphar.

4 In other biblical passages, bôr is also translated as "prison," "dungeon," and "grave." Cf. James Strong, The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible (1953; NY & Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1890), #953; Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1980), Vol. 1, #194e; Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and C.A. Briggs, Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament (rpt. 1957; London: Oxford UP, 1907), 92. Abbreviated as Strong's Exhaustive Concordance, TWOT, and Brown-Driver-Briggs, respectively.

5 TWOT, Vol. 1, #195. Chester C. McCown describes these cisterns as often being "bottle-shaped," in his article, "Cistern," Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible (NY & Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), Vol. 1. Abbreviated as IDB.

6 TWOT, Vol. 1, #241; Vol. 2, #1468b; Brown-Driver-Briggs, 109 & 690.

7 Ackerman notes that Jer. 37:16 also uses bôr for Jeremiah's place of incarceration; even more interesting is that Jeremiah's bôr is "in the house of Jonathan the secretary" (Jer. 37:15)--like Joseph, Jeremiah is held in a high official's house. Several incidents in the book of Jeremiah bear striking resemblances to elements of the Joseph story, suggesting that the echoes in Jeremiah may be deliberate.

8 Joseph's position as servant to Pharaoh's men "is one of responsibility, analogous to his relationships with Potiphar in the

previous scene. In effect, the cup-bearer and the baker replace the captain of the guard as principals in the scene. And significantly, the captain of the guard does not appear again after the two new characters are introduced" (Coats, 23). Thus the father function is now taken over by Pharaoh's servants, especially since they echo Jacob and prefigure Pharaoh in their concern about dreams.

⁹ TWOT, Vol. 1, #141; Moshe Greenberg, "Prison," IDB, Vol. 3.

¹⁰ The word Sheol (שְׁאוֹל) probably "derives from the root שָׁאָל, 'ask, inquire,' and was originally applied to the realm of the dead as the place whence oracles were sought from them" (T.H. Gaster, "Dead, Abode of the," IDB, Vol. 1). Joseph's ability to interpret dreams is one aspect of his connection with Sheol. Dr. David Williams, developing Robert Alter's treatment of the knowledge or recognition theme in Joseph's story, suggests that the etymology of Sheol may hint at Joseph's incipient divine knowledge, in contrast to the lack of knowledge displayed by his brothers and father.

¹¹ James B. Pritchard, ed., Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1969), 107. Abbreviated as ANET. Pritchard uses square brackets to indicate restorations of the texts and parentheses to indicate interpolations.

¹² According to T.H. Gaster, "nowhere in the OT is the abode of the dead regarded as a place of punishment or torment" ("Dead, Abode of the," IDB, Vol. 1).

¹³ Alter cites as "one of the most common features of the narrative art of the Bible" what Martin Buber has called Leitwortstil, or "leading-word style"--"a repetition of certain key-words . . . that become thematic ideas through their recurrence at different junctures [in a narrative], carrying . . . 'the meanings they have acquired in earlier contexts with them into their present and future contexts'" (Art, 92; Alter is quoting Bruce F. Kavin in Telling It Again and Again). Alter identifies house as a leitwort in the Joseph story (ibid., 94), but makes no attempt to link it with the pit, the prison, or Sheol.

¹⁴ Cf. Coats, 18; James S. Ackerman, "The Literary Context of the Moses Birth Story (Exodus 1-2)," Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives, ed. Kenneth R.R. Gros Louis (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974), 116-118. This article abbreviated as "Moses."

¹⁵ Hosea 11:5f-13:14 makes a poetic link between Egypt and Sheol, while Northrop Frye describes the "symbolic Egypt" as a "hell-prison," based on 1 Kgs. 8:51 (The Great Code: The Bible and Literature [Toronto: Academic Press Canada, 1982], 49). Also, the caravan which transports Joseph to Egypt carries ingredients used in the embalming process (cf. Westermann, Genesis 37-50, 41). Thus Joseph's journey is a kind of burial.

¹⁶ In translating from the Septuagint, Gen. 41:56 designates the storage places as "storehouses." The Hebrew, however, does not specify

what Joseph opens up. Cf. George Ricker Berry, The Interlinear Literal Translation of the Hebrew Old Testament (N.p.: Hinds & Noble, 1897); rpt. as The Interlinear Hebrew-English Old Testament (Genesis-Exodus) (1972; Grand Rapids, Mich: Kregel, 1970), 174.

17 Cf. von Rad, 331: "Changing clothes is in religion a widespread cultic, symbolical act by which man represents himself as renewed by the divinity." The significance of clothing is evident in such poems as the "Descent of Ishtar to the Nether World" (ANET, 108-109), in which Ishtar is divested of her crown, jewels, and garment upon entering the seven gates of the nether world. She is redressed (literally!) and restored to power as she passes beyond the gates and returns to the land of the living. Notice, too, that the residents of the Akkadian nether world "are clothed like birds, with wings for garments" (ANET, 107).

18 Pharaoh also names Joseph "Zaphenath-paneah" (41:45), which means, "God says: he is living" (Jerusalem Bible [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966], note d. for 41:45). Thus Joseph's new name, together with his new clothes, signals his restoration to life.

19 Again, the ins and outs here are translations not of Hebrew words but rather of directional tendencies. "Toward/away from" might express the concept equally well.

20 Interestingly, "the term Pharaoh, meaning 'Great House,' was originally applied to the palace and later was transferred to the ruler" (Carl E. DeVries, "Egypt, chronology of," IDB, Supp. Vol., 254). Joseph has truly found a home with Pharaoh.

21 That Joseph has securely reached the pinnacle of authority in Pharaoh's house is evidenced in the story's third section by his giving gifts of clothing to his brothers (45:22) as they prepare to go "up out of Egypt" (45:25), not to resume life in Canaan but to bring Jacob and "all his offspring . . . into Egypt" (46:6-7). Joseph does not give any garment to Jacob, though he does give him cattle and food (46:23). Sons were expected to care for their aged parents, but fathers still retained their respected status as lifegivers (cf. Ecclus. 7:27-28; Blidstein, 119-21). Blidstein quotes a tannaitic commentator who states that honoring one's parents includes supplying them with "food and drink, and with clean garments" (p. 61). However, gifts of clothing in this story always signal a figurative restoration to life, and Joseph does not have the power to do that for his father; he can merely sustain Jacob's life.

Notes for Chapter IV

¹ Robert Alter lists dreams, pits/prisons, and silver as motifs in the Joseph story, without exploring how they work (Art, 95).

² Westermann treats the problem differently by identifying 37:25b-27 and 28b as fragments of a variant to 37:28a, 29-30: "When the two variants, the one featuring Reuben and the other Judah, are seen side by side, it is obvious that there are two different presentations. . . . But Reuben's alarm when he finds the cistern empty (vv. 29-30) cannot be harmonized with the Judah variant and the Ishmaelite merchants" (Genesis 37-50, 42). However, rather than implying awkwardness in editing, Westermann sees the doubling as deliberate "to stress a motif or a step in the narrative," in this case, what he calls "questions of dominion and authority between family and state" (p. 42).

³ Cf. Strong's Exhaustive Concordance, #3701. In Joseph's story, keseph is translated as either silver or money.

⁴ The relationship between keseph and Joseph employs a type of wordplay called "parasonancy," in which each word shares two identical elements, though not necessarily in the same order (see Jack M. Sasson, "Wordplay in the Old Testament," IDB, Supp. Vol., p. 969). Though I have not found the words Joseph and keseph occurring in poetic parallelism, they do appear in close proximity (within five words of each other) in 37:28; 42:25; 43:18; and 44:2 (see Owens, pp. 220, 253, 260, and 264).

⁵ The Hebrew word for buy is shabar (שָׁבַר), "to deal in grain," which in turn comes from a root having to do with brokenness, since grain is broken into kernels. (Strong's Exhaustive Concordance, # 7666, 7667, & 7668.) Strong mentions the possibility that this root can also mean "dream interpretation." Presumably an interpretation is a breaking open of a dream--or text.

⁶ Art, 138. Alter gives a fresh, strong interpretation of why the two versions may have been included. Though I agree with most of his points, I place more emphasis on the keseph motif than he does. See his pp. 137-140.

⁷ But this gift is meager in comparison with what Jacob gave to Esau in 32:13-15. On that occasion Jacob was trying to buy a reconciliation with his own brother; now he tries to buy a reconciliation between his sons. Ironically, this gift includes the three ingredients carried by the caravan to Egypt in 37:25 (cf. Westermann, 122). Thus Benjamin's descent to Egypt, like Joseph's is again a kind of burial of a favourite son.

⁸ Jerusalem Bible, note b. for Gen. 17:1; Bernhard W. Anderson, "God, names of," IDB, Vol. 2, 412.

⁹ George Coats (pp. 8-11) points out the parallel between Jacob in Canaan and Israel in Egypt, but since he insists that 47:27a is the story's closing sentence, he obviously has missed these parallel time spans.

Notes for Chapter V

¹ "After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision" (15:1); "But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night" (20:3). Isaac Mendelsohn ("Dreams," IDB, Vol. 1, 868) asserts that visions and dreams are synonymous ("the roots of both mean 'to see'").

² According to von Rad, "the number eleven must be connected with the ancient notion of the eleven signs of the zodiac" (p. 347). Concerning the zodiac and the general significance of the number twelve, see Marvin H. Pope, "Twelve," IDB Vol. 4. Certainly the image of the stars refers to Jacob's family, both in number and in relation to God's promise to Abraham that his descendants will be like the stars in their multitude (15:5). Furthermore, the stars and the sheaves represent the heavens and the earth, a phrase often attached to God's name as a metaphor of his sovereignty over the world (von Rad, 20).

³ Seybold (p. 68) argues convincingly that the story's central paradox resides in unnatural relationships preserving what is natural: Joseph "will need to commit an unnatural act (make his brothers and parents subservient) in order to do the natural thing (keep his family from being destroyed)." If this is the case, then Jacob's rebuke reflects not so much his anger at Joseph's impertinence, but his uneasiness about the possible disruption of proper social order. He seems to have forgotten his own lack of concern for such an order when he usurped his brother Esau's position--a circumstance which now promises to repeat itself among his sons, and which has occurred earlier in the Judah and Tamar story.

⁴ Cf. J.N. Sanders, "Word, the," IDB, Vol. 4, 868-69; Brown-Driver-Briggs, 180-184.

⁵ Cf. Martin J. Buss, "Prophecy in ancient Israel," IDB, Suppl. Vol., 695; P.S. Minear, "Promise," IDB, Vol. 3, 893-96.

⁶ Von Rad writes that Joseph's dreams "present only silent pictures, without any explanatory word, to say nothing then of a divine address. This worldly character which is so pronounced in them is all the more remarkable when one considers that the narrator undoubtedly thinks of them as real prophecies given by God. . . . This lack of theological directness, this reserved distance from anything actually religious with which the dreams are informed, makes it possible for one to understand them in two ways, either as real prophecies or as the notions of a vainglorious heart" (p. 346). Between these two possibilities lies the uncertainty which compels us "to find out what happens" (Garp, 452).

⁷ Similarly, Waldemar Janzen writes: "To kill a prophet was more than the violent expression of personal hostility; it must have appeared at times as the ultimate protection against his powerful and potentially destructive word" ("Withholding the Word," Traditions in Transformation: Turning Points in Biblical Faith, ed. Baruch Halpern and John D. Levenson [Winona Lake, Ind: Eisenbrauns, 1981], 106).

8 Their fear closely resembles the Ancient Near Eastern anxiety concerning the withholding of the prophetic word, described by Janzen. Later, Pharaoh will demonstrate the same emotion for the same reason-- "there is no one who can interpret" (41:15).

9 Seybold notes the connection between these dreams and the story's theme of preservation: "In the butler's dream we see him capturing, preserving, and then offering the grape nectar to Pharaoh. . . . The baker's dream, on the other hand, shows him being careless with the grain as he allows it to be eaten by the birds . . ." (pp. 67-68).

10 Much could be said about the parallels between Joseph and Ba'al, especially in the latter's aspect as the dying and rising god, not historically (ie. that the Joseph legend grew out of an earlier Ba'al myth), but metaphorically. Unfortunately, such a comparison is beyond the scope of this essay. Cf. John Gray, "Ba'al," IDB, Vol. 1; James S. Ackerman, "Moses," 116.

11 Cf. John A. Wilson, "Egypt," IDB, Vol. 2. Notice the similarity between the names of Joseph's father-in-law Potiphara and his first Egyptian master Potiphar, both of which, according to Strong's Exhaustive Concordance (#6318, 6319), mean simply "an Egyptian," though the Jerusalem Bible (note d. for 41:45) equates the names with "Gift of Ra" (or Re). Joseph has enjoyed favourite son status with Jacob, Potiphar, Pharaoh, and now, presumably, Potiphara. Since Pharaoh as Egypt's king is also the "Son of Re," and Potiphara is a priest of Re, Joseph has very high connections indeed. It would be interesting to combine a study of Joseph as Ba'al with a study of Joseph as deputy to Re, with his position as Yahweh's minion overarching both the Canaanite and Egyptian gods.

12 Actually, as Ackerman points out, at that first meeting only ten of his brothers bow down to him, since Benjamin has remained behind in Canaan. Ackerman convincingly argues that "Joseph's dream sequence establishes the pattern of his course of action after his brothers come to Egypt: obeisance of all the brothers is of first importance" ("JJJ," 87-88).

Notes for Epilogue

¹ Note g. for 48:22. This verse is here translated, "As for me, I give you a Shechem more than your brothers, the one I took from the Amorites with my sword and my bow."

² Ackerman describes the Joseph story as depicting "human beings deciding and acting, both foolishly and wisely, in a world where mortals shape their destiny within a divine plan" ("JJJ", 112). Though promises are made and gifts are given, the recipients have some responsibility in determining "what happens."

³ Ackerman ("JJJ," 109-111) makes this same point, but his reading differs from mine, though our views are certainly not mutually exclusive. However, despite its thematic links with the rest of Joseph's story, I find this poem disruptive, since it brings the story to a (lengthy) standstill just before the end. For similar reasons, many scholars see the poem as a major example of material interpolated from an originally independent tradition. But perhaps the story's original audience had a different sense of ending and found it to be satisfying. Certainly by naming and providing a past and a future for each of Jacob's sons, this passage fulfills the story's initial promise to tell "the history of the family of Jacob" (37:1)--appropriately, in the context of yet more promises about what will happen.

⁴ Joseph also receives the "blessings of heaven above" and the "blessings of the deep which couches beneath" (v. 25), ie. blessings from every part of the earth; thus his dream of the sun, moon, and stars bowing down to him is fulfilled in the sense that the whole world is his.

⁵ Von Rad argues that v. 5 evidences a different tradition concerning Jacob's place of burial (p. 431). This is not unlikely; however, rather than contradicting von Rad's, my reading explores an additional reason why the editor of Genesis might have included this material.

⁶ White argues that because the Pentateuchal narrative is really a national autobiography describing, in his words, "events of word reception (prohibitions, promises, covenants)" which set in motion everything that follows, "the narrator is then in the strange position of not being able to conclude the story. It is beyond his control since the words come from a source outside of himself. The story can end only when the words cease to come to the nation" ("Word Reception," 70-71). Thus as long as there is unfulfilled promise, there is unfinished story.

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