

THE ROLE OF DESTINY¹ IN THE JOSEPH STORY

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The story of Joseph and his brethren is by far the longest and arguably the most suspenseful in the Pentateuch and bridges the stories of the individual lives of the patriarchs in the Book of Genesis to the history of the people of Israel in the Book of Exodus. It is the story itself, however, the plot and the gallery of characters wherein the dynamics of the relationships between parents and children and between siblings are played out that has established it as a literary gem and has generated much analysis and fictional retelling.²

Although the only explicit reference in the text to divine agency, prior to Joseph's revelation of his true identity, is where Joseph's prospering is attributed to God (Gen.39:3) and where Joseph attributes his skill in dream-interpretation to God (Gen. 40:3, 49:16), even to the casual reader, an aura of Providence seems to pervade the entire story.³ All of the actions of individuals are understandable as motivated by the usual emotions associated with that particular situation. Yet there seems to be a hidden hand working to bring about a preordained end.⁴ When the drama is over and the smoke of suspense has cleared and tangled emotions sorted out, Jacob, the grandson of Abraham, to whom it had been foretold: *Your seed shall be strangers in a land that is not theirs* (Gen. 15:13), finds himself and his entire family living in the land of Egypt. It was clearly the intention of the Biblical narrator to suggest that the salient data in the Joseph story can be connected to show that they were designed to bring about the realization of this prophesy to Abraham. While clear perhaps to the reader, this precise connection was probably not suspected by the characters within the narrative, as there would have been no reason for Abraham to have divulged this painful period their people's future to his children. There are the several unexpected incidents in the story that can be construed as Providential: Joseph's outrageously provocative dreams, Jacob's untoward sending of Joseph to visit his angry brothers, the mysterious "man" who directs the lost Joseph to his brothers, the sale and

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resale of Joseph until he ends up as a slave in Egypt, and Joseph's phenomenal rise to power.⁵

The sense of Providence that I have described above pertains to events which shape the overall narrative of the Bible. In what follows I shall explore the question as to whether Jacob and Joseph themselves were conscious of playing a role in a drama greater than that of a personal family quarrel and if yes, what was the nature of that greater drama and what were the circumstances that made them so aware.

I

Let us start with Joseph but from the opposite end. Just after Joseph had identified himself to his distraught brothers, he makes the following unexpected announcement: *And now be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves that you have sold me here, for God did send me before you to preserve life . . . for there are yet five years [of famine] . . . So it was not you that sent me here, but God* (Gen. 45:8).

How shall we interpret this surprisingly conciliatory statement? If this reflects a sincerely held belief, then when and for what reasons did Joseph arrive at such a conclusion? On the other hand, perhaps this was just a clever device to calm the panic of his guilt-ridden brothers in order to gain their cooperation for his next move? The answer depends upon how Joseph remembered the terrifying series of violent experiences that had suddenly taken him from a pampered, carefree life of teen-age indulgence and plunged him into a vortex of dangerous challenges, weighty responsibilities and strange values. As he settled into his new position in Egypt what were Joseph's thoughts about his brothers who had dealt so cruelly with him, and about his father who had sent him on the near-fatal visit to his brothers. The text is silent. In the absence of any counter evidence, we may assume that Joseph's memories of the traumatic events that brought him to Egypt were those of any person who would have been so victimized, in this case: deep hatred and fear of his brothers and a mixture of reverence, concern and doubts towards his father. When Joseph first recognizes his brothers among those who came down to Egypt for food, his first reaction is that of one seeing an old enemy: extreme caution. He decides not to reveal himself until he learns more about their intentions. *And he spoke roughly with them* (42:7). The next verse repeats *And Joseph knew [recognized] his brothers but they knew him not*

(42:8), that is to say, that he had plenty of time to devise a plan. Immediately thereafter we are told that Joseph remembered the dreams which he had dreamed of them (Gen.42:9).

What activated this memory? When he first recognizes his brothers, the fact that *they came and bowed down to him with their faces to the earth* (Gen. 42:7) did not register, since all who came before him did so. And so he continued to question them. But suddenly he made the connection: In his dreams he had seen them bowing down so obsequiously. But what was it about the dreams that explains the apparently cruel steps that Joseph takes immediately thereafter. There are, of course, the obvious interpretations: first, what Joseph "remembered" about the dreams was the brothers' violent reaction to them leading to his suffering. Therefore this was a chance for revenge. Secondly, Joseph is testing his brothers to see if they have learned to be responsible for each other. Indeed, from their conversation between themselves they seem to have regretted their evil actions (Gen. 42:21,23). However, I wish to suggest another possibility. What Joseph remembered about his dreams was something even more memorable than its contents, something which, as I shall explain later, may be called the "prophetic" quality of the experience itself. To explain this, let us briefly review the dreams' sequence.

In the first dream involving sheaves of grain, the sheaves of the brothers (unspecified number) bow down to Joseph's sheaf. In relating his dream to his brothers, Joseph uses the imperious *Shimu na* – **Hear I pray you**. As a result, the brothers hated him *even more* than that aroused by his father's favoritism (37:4,5). After his second dream, it is said:

And he told to his brothers and said: Behold I have dreamed yet a dream and behold the sun and the moon and eleven stars bowed down to me, and he told it to his father and his brothers and his father rebuked him and said to him, 'What is this dream that you have dreamed! Shall I and your mother and your brothers come to bow down to you in the earth?'

And his brothers envied him but his father kept the matter in mind [filed it in his memory] (Gen. 37:9-11).⁶

What was only implicit in the first dream is now embarrassingly explicit. While the brothers and parents are symbolized, albeit thinly, as stars, sun and moon, the act of abject obeisance is performed before an undisguised "me" –

your unmistakable younger brother, Joseph. The most astonishing and troubling aspect of the dreams is not so much the audacity of Joseph's fantasies but the fact that although having seen the explosive reaction of his brothers to the first dream, he would again badger them with an even more provocative one. After all, anyone could have "bad dreams" but you don't have to go around broadcasting them. As the text indicates, *And they hated him yet more for his dreams and for his words* (37:8), i.e. that he kept telling them about them. But perhaps a hint by Genesis Rabbah which sees a similarity between Joseph's "Hear, I pray you..." and the language of the chastising prophets can help us understand Joseph's strange behavior.⁷ The dream experience, as such, had a compulsive effect in that to the prophet the words were like *a burning fire shut up in his bones* (Jer. 20:8,9) that he could not suppress and was impelled to relate to others. Therefore, in the case of Joseph, against his better judgment, the words just blurted out. Thus it was this unusual feature of his dreams that Joseph now remembered as he witnessed what appeared to be the realization of the first dream, namely a number of his brothers have bowed down to him in a matter involving grain. Joseph begins to believe that his dreams were more than "imaginings of the heart." This was strengthened by his recent experience in which he had successfully interpreted the pairs of dreams of the royal ministers in prison and of Pharaoh himself. The fact that he also had had two successive dreams on the same theme reinforced his belief that the dreams were the result of Divine agency. Thus it was the sudden flash-back of the dreams that prompted Joseph to see the entire chain of events as the work of Providence, enabling him rather charitably to say to his brothers "It was not you who sent me here but God." There is no reason to believe he was not sincere.

II

Of course, for Jacob the idea of destiny was not new.⁸ As the third and culmination of the Patriarchs, he had grown up with this idea. After his painful encounters with Esau and before he left for Haran, his father Isaac had conferred upon him the Blessing of Abraham (Gen. 27:4) which included the promise of land, *seed as the dust of the earth* and to be a blessing to all the

families of the earth (Gen. 28:13,14). While not all of Abraham's or Isaac's "seed" had inherited the Abrahamic destiny, all of the sons of Jacob to be known as the collective Israel would be the heirs of the Blessing and the mission. Thus, when the aged Jacob, weary in body and soul, finally settles down in the land of the *sojournings of his father, the land of Canaan* (Gen. 37:1), it was with the belief that this is where his large and diverse family would put down roots, grow, and where the Blessing of Abraham would gradually come to pass. "Jacob wished to dwell in peace and quiet, when there burst upon him the fury of Joseph".⁹

It would seem that Jacob first becomes aware of the brewing problem in his family when, together with his sons, he is summoned to listen to the dreams of his favorite son, Joseph. Jacob's initial reaction is essentially an expostulation: "What is this dream that you have dreamed!" That is, "this isn't a proper dream at all!" Jacob's next few words reflect both disappointment and disbelief. Disappointment, because if dreams are a reflection of the dreamer's hidden desires, then this one reveals arrogance and a brazen disrespect on the part of Joseph towards his parents. Disbelief, because if dreams portend the future then Jacob found it preposterous: *Shall I and your mother* [Rachel was no longer alive] *and your brothers come to bow down to you on the ground?* (Gen. 37:10). Jacob could not even imagine a circumstance in which that could actually take place. But if this truly represents Jacob's reaction, how do we understand the last few words of the verse 37:11: *But his father* [Jacob] *kept the matter in mind*. That is, he stored it away in his long-term memory. Why?

What Joseph first realized later in Egypt dawned on Jacob upon witnessing the strange way Joseph trumpeted his dreams to all who would listen. Furthermore, it was precisely the element of blatant unreality that caused Jacob to have second thoughts. Although having the signs of a message, the dream could not possibly be realized literally since Rachel was no longer alive. So perhaps it should be interpreted figuratively; the "sun and the moon" represent Jacob and Rachel as a patriarch and matriarch of the Covenantal people, and by bowing down to Joseph are in effect saying: "We acknowledge that in and through you will come the next stage in the development of the people of the Covenant." Having considered that, Jacob stepped back and decided to let the manifest destiny play itself out. *But his father kept the matter in mind*.

When Joseph is reported killed and Jacob is shown his "torn and bloodied" coat of many colors, his grief is mixed with incredulity. The promise of the dream resists the evidence of his eyes. Jacob is unable to be consoled, perhaps a symptom of his subconscious belief that Joseph must somehow still be alive. Fast forward to the jubilant return of the brothers with the exciting news: *Joseph is yet alive and he is ruler over all the land of Egypt* (45:26). The verse concludes, *and his heart fainted, for he believed them not*. Given Jacob's stubborn refusal to accept Joseph's death, why should he now not accept this happy news? I suggest that the words "he believed them not" refers to the second part of their report: "And he rules over all of the land of Egypt." For Jacob, that is by far the most marvelous and incredible development that his young son, a Hebrew, had become the ruler of the great country of Egypt.

After the brothers told Jacob of *all that Joseph had said to them and he saw the wagons which had been sent* (45:27) Jacob declared *I will go and see him before I die* (45:28). It is important that we try to understand the conflict that occupied Jacob's mind at this point; a conflict between Jacob's sense of destiny, as a Patriarch, versus his love for his son and the pride in seeing him in such high position. In terms of his destiny as a Patriarch, Jacob understood his obligation to remain in the land which had been promised to his "seed." However, the hardship of another five years of famine argued in favor of his going down to Egypt rather than having Joseph come to visit him. Sight of the recognizably Egyptian wagons convinced Jacob not only of the high post of the sender but that the hardship of the journey for a man of his advanced age would be manageable. "I will go and see him before I die," said Jacob, with every intention of returning as soon as the famine was over. However, on the way Jacob paused at Beer Sheba to offer sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac (46:1) who had commanded Isaac *Go not down to Egypt* (26:2). To his great relief, God responds to Jacob saying: *Fear not to go down to Egypt, for I will there make of you a great nation* (46:3). Jacob was indeed a man of destiny who played a central role in the realization of the Blessing of Abraham, but not quite the way he had envisaged it. Jacob is not told under what circumstances his seed will "there" become a "great nation." It is enough for him to know that the radical move he is now making by moving to Egypt is in accord with the plan of Providence. Such was the faith of the

Patriarchs: although their destiny of which they had been given but a glimpse was to be fully realized only far in the distant future, their awareness of playing a part served as a guiding light to them throughout their individual lives as they went about crossing borders, fighting battles, calling in the name of God and, above all, striving to *command their children and households after them to keep the way of the Lord to do righteousness and justice* (Gen. 18:19).

CONCLUSION

The idea of destiny plays an important role in the story of Joseph on two different levels. The first as a connecting theme built into the very structure of the overall narrative of the Bible. Abraham is promised that his seed will develop into a great nation in a land that is not "theirs." The self contained events of the Joseph story bring about the settlement of the Children of Israel in the land of Egypt. In the present paper, I have explained how the idea of destiny has affected the behavior of the two major figures *within* the story: Jacob and Joseph. Both began to sense that their family events were part of a larger drama, at different times and in different degrees of clarity. However, neither was able to grasp the vast scope and magnitude of the universal drama of which their actions and lives were but a part.¹⁰ Both sensed that there was a lot more to come. At the end, each asked that when God would remember His people and lead them out of Egypt, their remains be taken with them and interred in the Promised Land. And so it came to pass. Today, some 3,500 years later, as the people of Israel have returned to their land, the story of Joseph and his brothers continues to be told and the resting places of Jacob and Joseph continue to be visited – all of this as the greater story, of which theirs was a crucial chapter, continues to unfold.

NOTES

1. The word "destiny" is defined as "a preordained course of events" which a religious person might see as preordained by God, that is Providential.
2. There comes to mind Thomas Mann's, *Joseph and his Brothers*, a trilogy of 1207 pages in the English translation published in 1948 and also a Broadway musical called "Joseph and his Coat of Many Colors."
3. This is noted by Nehama Leibowitz (p. 394, *Studies in Genesis*) based on the Midrash on Genesis 37:14, the mysterious *ish* in Genesis 7:14-17, and the interpretation of Nahmanides.
4. This is suggested by *Many are the thoughts in the heart of man, but the counsel of the Lord, that shall stand* (Prov. 19:21). While individuals go about freely pursuing their own ends, somehow at some point it is the "counsel of the Lord" that is brought to pass.
5. Most of these items have been noted by the commentators. For example, see Malbim on Genesis 37:14 and on 37:28.
6. According to Rashi, Jacob's initial dismissal of the dream was only to defuse the outrage of the brothers. In reality, as a doting father, Jacob hoped it portended a great future for his son. See also S'forno. Nahmanides says nothing on this verse, but sees the hand of Providence in the intervention of the "*ish*". Malbim treats the question of whether the preordained nature of the end compromises the free-will of the actors.
7. The Rabbis interpret the words *Hear, I pray you, this dream . . .* (Gen. 37:6) to mean "so will the prophets chastise you"; see Micah 6 (Gen. Rabbah 84:9). The prophet was forbidden to suppress his message under penalty of death (TB *Sanhedrin* 89a). Jeremiah reported the experience as *a burning fire shut up in my bones* (20:8,9) that he was forced to express. See also Amos 3:8.
8. After all, Jacob was quite familiar with the prophetic possibilities of dreams, which could serve as the medium through which God communicates with man and also can conjure up significant visions (Gen. 28:12).
9. See Rashi on Genesis 37:1.
10. Joseph believed that the preordained purpose was to place him in a position of power so that he could save his family from famine (Gen. 45:8).