

THE NARRATION OF JOSEPH AND RABBINIC INTERPRETATION

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INTRODUCTION

The Narration of Joseph is a very short fragmentary Coptic text which re-tells the narrative of the selling of Joseph in Genesis 37:15-35. The work is dated by scholars to the fourth or fifth century CE and is part of the genre of ‘rewritten Scripture’ which uses the biblical text as a foundation for an embellished version of the narrative, with various additions and even changes. There are differences of opinion among scholars regarding whether the author of this work was Jewish or Christian, with no definitive evidence from the text itself.¹ It has not achieved much scholarly attention since its publication in 1961, but that may change as it has been included in the second volume of Davila and Bauckham’s *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (2025) collection. The text is concurrent with parts of the rabbinic midrash and thus can shed light on certain points of rabbinic interpretation of the text, seeing them in conversation and opposition to alternative interpretive themes that were being offered at that time.

In this article we will examine two places where *The Narration of Joseph* differs in its interpretation of elements of the Joseph story from rabbinic midrash, and what that teaches us about the messages and methodologies of each work.

THE MAN ON THE WAY

A key figure in getting Joseph to his brothers is an unidentified man who informs Joseph where they are. *A man came upon him wandering in the fields. The man asked him, ‘What are you looking for?’ He answered, ‘I am looking for my brothers. Could you tell me where they are pasturing?’ The*

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man said, 'They have gone from here, for I heard them say: Let us go to .' So Joseph followed his brothers and found them at (Gen. 37:15-17). As noted by Ibn Ezra in his commentary to this verse, the plain understanding is that the man encountered by Joseph was simply a traveler who happened to see where the brothers went.

In *The Narration of Joseph* this figure is identified as the devil "in the form of and old man." The term used is διάβολος (diabolos), the Greek word for devil. "The devil said to him: 'Follow (me) and I shall take you to them because I know where they are.'" Joseph recognizes that this person is actually the devil in disguise. "Joseph said to him: 'Go away from me, for I know who you are. You are the seducer ever since the fathers of my fathers. I will not follow you.' The devil was shamed by Joseph and left him." Joseph continues on his own to the brothers, where the devil preceded him. "When the devil realized he had been put to shame by him, he quickly moved on and took dwelling with the brothers of Joseph. He led evil thoughts to stir up inside them against their brother." After this the devil is no longer mentioned in the remaining text.

This identification of the man on the way with the devil stands in marked contrast to the rabbinic midrash which consistently identifies the man Joseph encounters with an angel, and notes that the angel comes to help Joseph, not bring him harm. In most midrashic works the angel is identified as Gavriel,² while some suggest it was Refael.³ In *Bereishit Rabbah* 84:14, "Rabbi Yannai said: Three angels came to his assistance: *A man came upon him; The man asked him; The man said.*" Each mention of a man in the narrative is interpreted by R. Yannai as referring to a different angel, making a parallel between Joseph and Abraham, visited by three men in Gen. 18, understood in the midrash as angels as well.⁴

Beyond this particular encounter, rabbinic literature inserts the angel Gavriel multiple times in the Joseph story in a helpful role, saving Joseph from being abused by Potiphar (TB *Sotah* 13b) and teaching him seventy languages while imprisoned in Egypt, knowledge needed to assume a high governmental office in the court of Pharaoh (TB *Sotah* 36b).

Although the idea of this angel having a negative role is found in the later midrash *Agadat Bereishit* (ch. 73), dated to the early medieval period, the role there is ultimately positive as well.⁵ There the same angel who appeared

to Joseph when he was looking for his brothers, unnamed in this particular midrash, returned when the brothers first came before Joseph in Egypt. "The angel descended and appeared to Joseph in the form of a man, and he said to him, 'Why do you have mercy on these people? Don't you know how much they have troubled you? They threw you into a pit and sold you four times.' He began to accuse them and said (these accusations) to Joseph, immediately *he acted like a stranger toward them* (Genesis 42:7)." Even in this instance, however, the angel's involvement is portrayed not as trying to harm Joseph, but rather as helping set in motion the chain of events that will result in the brothers demonstrating their concern for Benjamin in Genesis 44:33-34 leading to Joseph's subsequent reconciliation with his brothers in Genesis 45:4-8.

The theological message of the midrashic interpretation that the man on the way was an angel sent by God is spelled out by Ramban in his commentary to Gen. 37:15. "Scripture...informs us that the Divine decree is true and man's industry is worthless. The Holy One, blessed be He, sent him a guide without his knowledge in order to bring him into their hands. It is this that our Rabbis intended when they said that these men were angels, for these events did not occur without purpose, but rather to inform us that *It is the counsel of the Eternal that shall stand* (Proverbs 19:21)." Although putting him in harm's way by leading him to his brothers, the rabbinic understanding is that this encounter served to help Joseph fulfill his destiny.

The commentary *Etz Yosef* by Chanoch Zundel ben Joseph (d. 1867) on *Bereishit Rabbah* 84:14 expands on the idea that God sent this angel in order to assist Joseph by adding that it was angelic protection that saved Joseph from being killed by his brothers or harmed in the pit, and it was through this angelic intervention that Joseph was sold to Egypt to facilitate his rise to greatness there. The man on the way, understood as an angel, has a role in making sure Joseph consistently stays on track to fulfill the destiny that he dreamed of.

The identification of the man with an angel is found in some Pseudepigraphal works as well. The early fifth century work, *The Syriac History of Joseph*, states that the helpful angel was sent in response to a prayer by Jacob, "And may God, He who was with Abraham and Isaac, may He be with you, and may that angel, which brought me up from the East and was a support to me, go with you." Although appearing as an old man in this work as he does

in *The Narration of Joseph*, here he is not a devil but an angel, “And behold, an angel of God came to him in the form of an old man, and he said to him, ‘What are you looking for, young man?’...And Joseph went with the angel, and from afar he showed him and said, ‘Behold, your brothers. Go in peace, and may the God of your fathers be with you.’”⁶

More broadly, the idea that the man was really an angel indicates an interpretative approach about how to think about problems and difficulties encountered in life. Rabbinic literature is expressing the hopeful idea that life’s difficulties should be seen as events directed by God, and that they ultimately bring a person to the place that they were meant to be, to fulfill God’s plan for them. This understanding is expressed by Joseph himself when he revealed his identity to his brothers, and framed his experience in this manner; *God has sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival on earth, and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance. So, it was not you who sent me here, but God—who has made me a father to Pharaoh, lord of all his household, and ruler over the whole land of Egypt* (Gen. 45:7-8).

Identifying the man on the way with the devil presents an opposing theology, that the troubles and obstacles encountered in life are caused by supernatural forces of evil who try to bring harm and suffering to humans. Scholars have speculated that this is a Christian element generally associated with narratives about the temptation of saints and monks.⁷

The incorporation of the devil in *The Narration of Joseph* also serves to potentially soften the responsibility of the brothers in the sale of Joseph, as the devil “led evil thoughts to stir up inside them against their brother.” This too can also be seen as an early Christian element, where the devil is blamed for human failings. This concept is found in the New Testament, for example, in Acts 5:3 where Peter says to Ananias, “Satan has so filled your heart,” and Ephesians 6:11 where Paul states, “Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes.” This idea is further seen in the works of early Church theologians, such as Justin Martyr (ca. 100 – 165 CE) in his *Apologies*, “For we forewarn you to be on your guard, lest those demons whom we have been accusing should deceive you...For they strive to hold you their slaves and servants; and sometimes by appearances in dreams, and sometimes by magical impositions, they subdue all who make no strong opposing effort for their own salvation” (*First Apology* 14). He warns

of “the instigation of evil demons... since of old these evil demons, effecting apparitions of themselves, both defiled women and corrupted boys” (*First Apology* 5).

Incorporating the devil into the story and having him to ultimately blame for the actions of the brothers against Joseph contradicts Joseph’s own words in Gen. 45:5, *I am your brother Joseph, he whom you sold into Egypt*. The absolute responsibility of the brothers is reinforced in many rabbinic statements, for example *Tanchuma Vayeshev* 2:5, “R. Mana maintained: The tribes were punished because they sold Joseph, and their sin was not forgiven until they died. Hence Scripture says of them: *Surely, this iniquity shall not be expiated by you until you die* (Isa. 22:17).”

THE ROLE OF GAD

In *The Narration of Joseph*, Gad displays particular hatred of Joseph. “In the middle of the night, Gad took stones and threw them down upon him with the aim in mind to kill him in the cistern. But Joseph exclaimed by saying: ‘My brother, Gad leave me!’ In contrast, Gad did not cease from throwing stones down on him. And no single stone touched Joseph. When realizing, however, that no single stone touched him he threw even more stones upon him. Joseph shouted from down in the cistern: ‘My brother, Judah, help me!’ Judah got up while sleeping among his herd of sheep. And he went to the cistern and found Gad throwing stones down upon him. But Judah restricted him.”

In rabbinic literature, it is Simeon who is singled out as having particular hatred for Joseph, based on Joseph’s decision to single him out for imprisonment in Gen. 42:24, *and he took Simeon from among them and had him bound before their eyes*. *Tanchuma Yashan* (1:10:17) states that Gen. 37:18-19, *They said to one another, ‘Here comes that dreamer! Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; and we can say, ‘A savage beast devoured him.’ We shall see what comes of his dreams!’* is reporting the discussion between Simeon and Levi. Targum Pseudo-Jonathan incorporated this into his Aramaic version of Gen. 42:24, “And from them he took Simeon, who had counselled them to kill him, and bound him before them.” *Bereishit Rabbah* 84:14 explains that it was actually Simeon personally who threw Joseph into the pit. These midrashim are brought by Rashi on Gen.

42:24, “Simeon: He had cast him into the pit and it was he who had said to Levi *Here comes that dreamer!*” Other midrashic works indicate that Simeon originally wanted to kill Joseph with an arrow when he saw him approaching.⁸

From the rabbinic perspective it is unusual to single out Gad, son of Zilpah, handmaiden of Leah, as someone who especially hated Joseph. In the *Jerusalem Talmud* (*Peah* 1:1) Joseph is actually portrayed as sticking up for the sons of the handmaidens, who are presented as being bullied by Leah’s children, “It is written, *And Joseph reported their evil slander to their father* (Gen. 37:2). What did he say?...Rabbi Yehudah said, they abuse the sons of the handmaidens and treat them like slaves.”

On the other hand, Genesis 37:2 states, *Joseph tended the flocks with his brothers, as a helper to the sons of his father’s wives Bilhah and Zilpah. And Joseph brought bad reports of them to their father*, from which *Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer* 38 derives that Joseph said bad things about sons of the handmaidens in particular. There we find that Joseph “saw the sons of his father’s concubines eating the flesh of the roes and the flesh of the sheep whilst they were alive, and he brought a reproach against them before Jacob their father, so that they could not see his face any more (in peace), as it is said, *And they could not speak peaceably unto him* (Gen. 37:4).” Similarly, Ramban to Genesis 37:2 states, “The verse thus states that because he was a lad he was constantly with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father’s wives, never being separated from them on account of his youth, for their father had commanded them to watch over him and serve him, not the sons of the mistresses, and he brought an evil report concerning them to their father. It was for this reason that these four brothers (Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher) hated Joseph.” Still, none of these rabbinic sources single out Gad as hating Joseph more than the others.

The theme of particular animosity towards Joseph from the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah as a group is found in other Pseudepigraphal works. In the early fifth century CE work *The Syriac History of Joseph* we find that “when Joseph reached them, and asked after their welfare, the sons of the handmaidens rose against him with cursing and mocking. And they fell upon him like wild animals, and they stripped off the coat with which he had been clothed and threw him into the cistern naked” (6:1-2).⁹ This also features in *Joseph and*

Asenath, a narrative that dates from between 200 BCE and 200 CE. There the son of Pharaoh who is jealous of Joseph plots to kill him with the help of all of the sons of the handmaidens. “And his servants said to him in his ear, saying, ‘Behold, the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, Leah and Rachel’s maidservants, Jacob’s wives, are hostile to Joseph and Asenath and envy them’” (24). In that story, the son of Pharaoh first approached Simeon and Levi to help him in his plot against Joseph but was rebuffed (23). The son of Pharaoh then gets the sons of the handmaidens to join in his scheme. Later, “Naphtali and Asher spoke to their older brothers, Dan and Gad, saying, ‘Why do you once again act wickedly against our father Israel and against our brother Joseph?’” but this doesn’t dissuade Dan and Gad who “were angry at them” (25). In this text it is Levi who lets the other brothers know what is planned and gets them to save Asenath (26), who convinces Simeon to show mercy to not slay the plotting brothers (28).¹⁰

In other Pseudepigraphal works, Gad is partnered with Simeon as hating Joseph more than the other brothers. The *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* is a 2nd century CE work collecting the dying commands of the twelve sons of Jacob. In the *Testament of Zebulon*, Zebulon reports that “Simeon and Gad came against Joseph to kill him” (1:9), and that “I, through pity for Joseph, did not eat, but watched the pit, since Judah feared lest Simeon, Dan, and Gad should rush off and slay him” (1:26).¹¹ Simeon is included as a brother who hated Joseph probably for reasons similar to the rabbis, as he was singled out by Joseph for imprisonment. Regarding Dan and Gad, they are each the firstborn of a handmaid, Bilhah and Zilpah respectively, so could be understood as leaders within that group.

The *Testament of Gad* has an extensive account of Gad’s particular hatred of Joseph. “And Joseph told our father that the sons of Zilpah and Bilhah were slaying the best of the flock and eating them against the judgement of Reuben and Judah. For he saw that I had delivered a lamb out of the mouth of a bear, and put the bear to death; but had slain the lamb, being grieved concerning it that it could not live, and that we had eaten it. And regarding this matter I was wroth with Joseph until the day that he was sold. And the spirit of hatred was in me, and I wished not either to hear of Joseph with the ears, or see him with the eyes, because he rebuked us to our faces saying that we were eating of the flock without Judah” (1:6-9). Gad admits that he had

planned to kill Joseph, “I confess now my sin, my children, that oftentimes I wished to kill him, because I hated him from my heart. Moreover, I hated him yet more for his dreams; and I wished to lick him out of the land of the living, even as an ox licks up the grass of the field” (1:10-11). In hindsight, Gad realized the error of his ways, “And Judah sold him secretly to the Ishmaelites. Thus the God of our fathers delivered him from our hands, that we should not work great lawlessness in Israel. And now, my children, hearken to the words of truth to work righteousness, and all the law of the Most High, and go not astray through the spirit of hatred, for it is evil in all the doings of men” (1:13-15). In his testament, Gad goes on to speak at length about the dangers and ill effects of hatred and jealousy, which is the theme of that work.¹²

These texts themselves never explain why Gad would have hated Joseph more than other brothers. It can be speculated that being the firstborn son of Leah’s handmaiden would make Gad a likely villain to serve as Joseph’s enemy, as he combines various points of tension and rivalry with Joseph, Leah versus Rachel, handmaid offspring versus wife offspring and firstborn versus a different firstborn. Additionally, it is possible that the name Gad, meaning fortune (Gen. 30:11), may have inspired the account of his hatred for others with good fortune in the *Testament of Gad*. This is found in Gad’s message to his children, “If a man prospers more than you, do not be vexed, but pray also for him, that he may have perfect prosperity, for so it is expedient for you. And if he be further exalted, be not envious of him, remembering that all flesh shall die; and offer praise to God, who giveth things good and profitable to all men.”¹³ In his instructions to his children, Gad is telling them that in his youth he did not espouse this philosophy, and they should learn from his error.

Gad is never found in this role in the rabbinic midrash as that genre does not attribute characteristics to characters that are not in some manner hinted to in the text.¹⁴ That Simeon may have hated Joseph more than others is hinted to in Joseph’s decision to imprison him. That the sons of the handmaidens hated him can be seen as hinted to in the juxtaposition of Joseph tending flocks with them and then immediately bringing a bad report to his father (Gen. 37:2). Gad though is not mentioned by name in the entire Joseph narrative, and with no textual allusions indicating that he hated Joseph more than

the others, he is fundamentally ignored in the midrashim about the story of Joseph.

CONCLUSION

Non-rabbinic exegetical literature that is contemporary with the rabbinic era, even only a small snippet such as *The Narration of Joseph*, provides insights into the midrashic approach by allowing us a glimpse into other approaches that the rabbis may have been aware of, but negated. Through the midrash the rabbis expressed certain theological ideas and rejected others, seen here in the way the anonymous man that Joseph encountered on the way is identified as an angel, rejecting the idea that he was the devil. Additionally, the methodology used in the midrash, although creative and sometimes fanciful, had its own limitations, so that the idea of the particular villainy of Gad, represented multiple times in the works of the Pseudepigrapha, does not appear in rabbinic midrash.

NOTES

1. For the full background of this text and its discovery, see J. Zandee, "Iosephus Contra Apionem. An Apocryphal Story of Joseph in Coptic." *Vigiliae Christianae*, vol. 15, no. 4, 1961, pp. 193–213; Anders Klostergaard Petersen, "The Narrative of Joseph" in James R. Davila and Richard Bauckham, eds., *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: More Noncanonical Scriptures*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2025), pp. 257–268.
2. For example, *Midrash Tanchuma* (Vayeshev 2), Targum Pseudo-Jonathan and *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* 38. This is the opinion brought by Rashi.
3. M.M. Kasher, *Torah Shlemah* vol. 6 (Jerusalem: The Torah Shelemah Institute, 1992), p. 1412, item 110.
4. See for example, *Bereishit Rabbah* 48:9, 10, 14.
5. Solomon Buber, ed., *Agadat Bereishit* (Cracow: 1903), p. 147. For the date of this work, see Anat Reizel, *Introduction to the Midrashic Literature* (Alon Shvut: Tevunot, 2010), pp. 256–258.
6. Kristian S. Heal, "The Syriac History of Joseph" in Richard Baukham, James R. Davila and Alexander Panayotov, eds., *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: More Noncanonical Scriptures*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013), p. 95.
7. Anders Klostergaard Petersen, "The Narrative of Joseph" in James R. Davila and Richard Bauckham, eds., *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: More Noncanonical Scriptures*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2025), pp. 262–263.
8. M.M. Kasher, *Torah Shlemah* vol. 6 (Jerusalem: The Torah Shelemah Institute, 1992), p. 1414, item 125.

9. Kristian S. Heal, "The Syriac History of Joseph" in Richard Baukham, James R. Davila and Alexander Panayotov, eds., *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: More Noncanonical Scriptures*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013), p. 96.
10. C. Burchard, "Joseph and Asenath" in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* volume 2, (New York: Doubleday, 1985).
11. Rutherford Platt, ed., *The Forgotten Books of Eden* (New York: Meridian, 1926), p. 244-245.
12. M. de Jonge, H. W. Hollander, eds., *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs: A Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 1985), p. 320.
13. Rutherford Platt, ed., *The Forgotten Books of Eden* (New York: Meridian, 1926), p. 256.
14. See Hananel Mack, *The Aggadic Midrash Literature* (Tel Aviv: MOD Books, 1989), pp. 129-130.



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