How to Read the Bible?

I have favored the analysis that best explains the text, its problems, its teachings, and its depth. I want to underscore that these are definitely different modes of analysis, that they are axiomatically inconsistent, and that my standard of which to employ is admittedly subjective. In my view, the answer to Steinmetz's question 'how does one read a text?' may include several right answers, depending not only on the reader, but also on the particular text.

See Also: *Joseph: Portraits Through the Ages* (The Jewish Publication Society, 2016).

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September 2016

In a brief and brilliant essay, the late David C. Steinmetz, an expert on the Protestant Reformation, wrote a spirited defense of the superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis.[1] Steinmetz attacked the historical-critical method, with its agenda of discovering the original meaning of the prophet or evangelist as reductionist and obtuse regarding the nature of a text. [2] Steinmetz wrote, "I entirely agree that the Bible should be read like any other text. The question is, how does one read a text?" While acknowledging that medieval and early modern readers drew a wide range of lessons from the Parable of the Vineyard Workers (Mt 20:1-6), the best readers stayed within the bounds of plausible inferences about this parable's core teaching. Steinmetz preferred this pre-critical approach to either an historical-

[1] David C. Steinmetz, "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis" *Theology Today 37:27* (1980) 27-38. Steinmetz's question is excellent. His assertion that the Bible should be read as any other book seems problematic: even if granted in principle, in practice, the Bible not been read like any other book for two millennia.
[2] Steinmetz focused on Benjamin Jowett (1817-1893) "On the Interpretation of Scripture," but could as easily have chosen earlier scholars (e.g., Hobbes and Spinoza; Jowett's contemporaries (e.g. Graf, Wellhausen and Charles Briggs; or our own (e.g. Richard Elliott Friedman and Joel Baden).

critical approach, or, a contemporary academic one in which, "the question of truth can endlessly be deferred."[3]

In a lengthy and brilliant book, James Kugel claimed traditional readings of the Bible and historical-critical ones are mutually exclusive.[4] Traditional readers, the product of early interpreters who flourished before and after the mythical year zero, created a unified religious work from ancient, disparate and etiological folk tales from the Near East. Transformed into the Bible, a four-fold mode of reading biblical texts as cryptic, presentist, flawless, and divine prevailed until the assault of modern criticism. For many readers, and not only in devotional circles, these four presumptions remain intact. Kugel's bombshell elicited heated reactions, but Kugel stood his ground.[5] An Orthodox Jew, Kugel considers the real Bible the one canonized and interpreted by the rabbis.

These reflections appear nowhere in my book *Joseph: Portraits Through the Ages.* Lacking the theological acumen or erudition to challenge these positions, I attempted a narrative gesture that might speak to the general Bible reader. In practice, I chose to selectively re-tell Genesis 37-50, paying careful attention to the text, and then introduce both rabbinic traditions and historical critical scholarship, allowing these two contradictory approaches to take turns illuminating the biblical text. This post will take three examples from Genesis 37. A second post will address the issue of Joseph's rule over Egypt, relayed first in Genesis 41 and then, somewhat superfluously, in Genesis 47.

THE BROTHERS' HATRED

On first glance, Joseph's brothers' hatred seems to foreclose interpretation. The text says Joseph brought bad reports to his father about his half-brothers, that Jacob preferred Joseph over his older brothers, that Jacob gave Joseph a dramatic garment (the *ketonet passim*) as a gift, and that Joseph relates not once, but twice, self-aggrandizing dreams. True, brothers have been killed for less, even in Genesis 4, but their choked hatred seems a bit over the top. In this case, a better grasp of the

[3] Steinmetz, 38 seems to consider postmodern approaches inherently nihilistic. For a masterful review, see Vincent Leitch*, American Literary Criticism since the 1930s* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1988).
[4] James Kugel, *How to Read the Bible. A Guide to Scripture Then and Now* (NY: Free Press, 2007). Kugel carefully defines these early interpreters, and space precludes me from doing justice to this sensible and useful definition.
[5] See the reviews of *How to Read the Bible* by Kohlbrenner, Reeves and Sommer in *Jewish Quarterly Review* 100 2010, and Kugel's rejoinder on his web site: jameskugel.com

plain sense[6] emerges from applying an Erich Auerbach's insistence on the background biblical texts.[7] Auerbach's famous opening chapter in *Mimesis* argued that biblical narrative includes character development over time, not necessarily the case in other ancient texts, and the assumption that Bible readers recall earlier events and actions. Four backwards glances shed light on the brother's hatred.

1. "Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older one was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. 29:17 Leah had weak eyes; Rachel was shapely and beautiful. 29:18 Jacob loved Rachel; so he answered, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel."

The text tells us explicitly that Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah (29:31, 33) What the text does <u>not</u> say is how Leah's sons felt about this. By the time Joseph was born they were surely old enough to register Jacob's preference – and resent it. In this intimate world, it would have been impossible for Leah's children not to have known this. Perhaps it even explain Reuben's gift of the mandrakes to Leah (30:14). Would the brothers have resented Jacob for preferring Rachel to their mother? Probably. Would they have projected this resentment onto the patriarch's favorite son – it's only human.

2. "She (Rachel) conceived and bore a son, and said, "God has taken away my disgrace." 30:24 So she named him Joseph, which is to say, "May the Lord add another son for me." 30:25 After Rachel had borne Joseph, Jacob said to Laban, "Give me leave to go back to my own homeland…"

Naming speeches in the Bible have received careful attention.[8] In Joseph's case, both parties are characterized, paralleling Rachel's speech, which deploys two verbs in tension with each other. Rachel first declares that God has "removed her reproach," an action of subtraction, and then continues by proclaiming, "God add to me another son," an action of addition. The naming tells us how she suffered through her infertility (30:1) and how much she is like her striving husband. The second half of her naming speech contains a terrible irony – God will add Benjamin, but Rachel will die in childbirth. Biblical double-naming is rare; in this

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[6] The plain sense in modern terms is a bit different from what the rabbis called *p'shat* or the scholastics called *sensus plenior.*

[7] Willard Trask translated Auerbach's word *hintergrundlichkeit* in *Mimesis* as "fraught with background." As James Adam Redfield noted in "Behind Auerbach's Background" *Association of Jewish Studies Review* (2015), Trask coined a phrase that was richer than the original German.

[8] Following Umberto Cassuto, Ilana Pardes*, Countertraditions in the Bible*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 40-43, has analyzed the names of Leah's sons and concluded that these naming speech**e**s say more about the namer than the named.

case, we are invited to consider Joseph's fate too. If ever a biblical character could be described as someone who was first "removed" (*asaf*) and then "added back" (*yasaf*), that person would be Joseph, removed from the family only to prove the vehicle for that family's survival.

With respect to the brothers, I believe the transitional clause that follows the naming-speech is significant. The Hebrew reads וַיְהִי, כַּאֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה רָחֵל אֶת-יוֹסֵף. That little word *ka'asher* is usually rendered, "*when* Rachel had borne Joseph," but seems here more causal than coincidental. The juxtaposition of Joseph's birth and Jacob's request to return to Canaan cannot be disputed. What the brothers felt about this move can only be guessed at.

3. "Looking up, Jacob saw Esau coming, accompanied by four hundred men. He divided the children among Leah, Rachel, and the two maids, putting the maids and their children first, Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph last."

As Jacob prepares to meet Esau after many years, he is filled with fear, justifiably so. Years ago, the reader heard the depth of Esau's internal dialogue, "Let but the mourning period of my father come, and I will kill my brother Jacob." (27:41) That anger must have been evident to Rebekah, who commands Jacob to flee to Haran. Now, when Jacob sees Esau coming (33:1) he divides his family with the handmaids and their children precariously in the front, Leah and her children next, and two dearest, Rachel and Joseph, strategically placed last. Should the reader consider this placement trivial, it is repeated in verse 7, this time with Joseph in front of Rachel. The narrative focuses on the reconciliation: the sentiments of the other characters in this scene remain unrecorded, though predictable. Long before Joseph grew into the seventeen year old of Genesis 37, the brothers had ample reason to resent him.

One may cite endless commentaries on the causes and consequences of Joseph's brothers' hatred. Likewise, one may invoke the historical critical method which posits tribal rivalries as generative forces of this narrative. For my tastes, a plain reading a la Auerbach proves quite sufficient.

THE MAN IN THE FIELD

When he reached Shechem, 15a man came upon him wandering in the fields. The man asked him, "What are you looking for?" 16He answered, "I am looking for my brothers. Could you tell me where they are pasturing?" 17The man said, "They

have gone from here, for I heard them say: Let us go to Dothan." So Joseph followed his brothers and found them at Dothan.

Joseph's encounter with the man in the field (Gen 37-15-18) who redirects Joseph toward his brothers in Dothan has an undeniably extraneous feel to it. Why does this digression appear here at all? Could not Joseph have found the brothers easily and on his own? Who is this mysterious stranger who redirects a wandering Joseph toward his brothers? One may explain the man in the field in a purely literary fashion. Gabriel Josipovici does, likening this scene to one in NT Mark 14:51-52 in which an unnamed man "dressed only in a linen cloth" seems to show more devotion than Jesus' disciples. Why the Gospel writer puts him there we will never know. In both cases, Josipovici argues that these mini-incidents testify to "the primacy of narrative over interpretation."[9] For Josipovici, to push an interpretation further, does away with narrative, mystery, and the Bible itself.

One could leave it as Josipovici does. But one may prefer the medieval commentators who shared rabbinic hatred of the anonymous and pressed to identify the mystery man.[10] Rashi stated categorically, "This refers to the angel Gabriel," on the slim basis of a description in Dan. 10:5 of Gabriel as "the man Gabriel" (*ha-ish*), the same word used in Gen. 37:17.[11] At the opposite end of the spectrum, Abraham ibn Ezra[12] considered "the man" in Gen. 37:15 to be purely human. To Joseph's question regarding his brothers' whereabouts, ibn Ezra added the words, "if you know," as if to drive home the merely mortal status of this unnamed man. Nachmanides effectively split the difference between the two, agreeing that messenger(s) were sent by God, but not identical with Gabriel. For Nachmanides, the key lies in stressing the role of the Divine Providence.[13] Joseph certainly illustrates the old adage "God works in mysterious ways." Events operate on both a human and a divine level, only the first of which is obvious to the characters in the drama. With respect to these verses, the medievals may be

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[9] Gabriel Josipovici, *The Book of God*, 294.

[10] Isaac Heinemann, *Ways of the Aggadah* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1949), 27-35.

[11] Rashi's association of "the man" with the angel Gabriel has roots in Midrash Tanhuma, an earlier rabbinic text. Rashi's choice of earlier traditions are selective, not random. Rashi may be influenced by the mystical context of these verses. Jacob sends Joseph out from the "Valley" of Hebron (Gen. 37:14). But Hebron is on the same hilly ridge as Bethlehem and Jerusalem. This alludes to the spirit of Abraham, interred at Hebron, and to the promise made to the first patriarch that his family would both descend down to Egypt and return to the Land of Israel.

[12] Abraham Ibn Ezra, *Commentary on the Pentateuch* to Genesis 37:15, edition Strickman and Silver, (NY: Menorah 1988), p. 348. Ibn Ezra has two commentaries. The longer one adds the detail, "if you know," to the wayfarer's question, answering the (implied) question of how an ordinary person would know of the brothers whereabouts? Were he a divine messenger, this is not a textual problem.

[13] Nachmanides, *Commentary on the Torah, Genesis*, Translated by Charles (Chaim) Chavel, (NY: Shilo, 1971), 455-456. On this medieval debate, see Nehama Leibowitz, *New Studies in Genesis*, 496-399.

engaging in eisegesis, not exegesis, but I am unconvinced that literary analysis alone gets us to the meaning of Joseph's encounter with the mysterious stranger.

THE SALE OF JOSEPH

The sale of Joseph is notoriously confusing. We have Reuben's plan to double-back and free Joseph, Judah's plan to sell him and avoid direct bloodshed. We have Ishmaelites and Midianites doing different things (and one instance of Medanites, possible a textual corruption of Midianites.) We are uncertain who drew Joseph out of the pit; we have Joseph's later recollection of being "stolen, stolen" from the land of the Canaanites. Traditional rabbinic attempts to unravel these actions do not seem conclusive. One may stick to literary readings, and Edward Greenstein has plausibly argued that, like a Cubist painting or a Kurosawa movie, the text deliberately leaves the reader in the dark. God alone knows what ultimately happened, or if one prefers a more secular iteration, the narrative technique is deliberately opaque – as Josipovici might say, the "primacy of narrative over interpretation" is maintained. In Greenstein's words: "An equivocal reading of the sale of Joseph leads to the realization that in the view of the narrative, it is not crucial to our understanding of the story whether the brothers sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites or whether the Midianites kidnapped him. It is important, rather, to perceive that the descent of Joseph to Egypt and his subsequent rise to power there reveal divine providence in history. This, of course, is the single most pervasive theme in the Bible."[14]

When we have a confused text, when the rabbinic authorities are stymied by the facts, perhaps another approach may be added to the mix? [15] In this case, source criticism seems like a helpful application of Occam's Razor. Ben Sandler breaks down the story as follows:

> The treatment of Joseph at the end Genesis 37 can be summarized as follows:
> - **a.** The brothers see Joseph coming, and conspire to kill him and throw him into a pit (37:18-20).
> - **b.** Reuben intervenes to have them throw him in the pit, but not kill him (21-22).
> - **c.** The brothers take his coat (23) and throw him into the pit (24).
> - **d.** They then go to eat, and see Ishmaelites coming on their way to Egypt (25).

[14] Edward Greenstein, "An Equivocal Reading of the Sale of Joseph," in Gros-Louis, ed., *Literal Interpretations of the Bible II* (Nashville, 1974), 117-124.

[15] Of course, we do learn about the characters of both Reuben and Judah by reading this text as a unified whole.

- **e.** Judah tells his brothers that they should not kill Joseph (26), but rather should sell him to the Ishmaelites (27).
- **f.** Then, Midianites come and take Joseph out of the pit, and sell him to the Ishmaelites, who take him to Egypt (28).
- **g.** Reuben then goes to the pit to find Joseph gone (29), tells his brothers (30), who concoct the story of him being eaten by an animal and tell this to Jacob (31-35).
- **h.** The Medanites (Midianites?) then sell Joseph to Potiphar in Egypt (36).
  - i. The Ishmaelites take Joseph to Egypt and sell him to Potiphar (39:1)[16]

Sandler continues his analysis by dividing this text into two sources and then tying it to a Southern Judean tradition (in which Joseph is saved by Judah), and a Northern tradition in which a nod is paid to Reuben, by the time of the divided kingdoms, a transjordanian tribe. That the J source and the E source, respectively, had a hand in the narrative does not detract from Sandler's appreciation of the narrative.[17] That the fate of Joseph was still being debated centuries later, for Sandler, offers testimony as to how deeply Israelites cared about their distant past -- even in the case of a character who never broke into the ranks of the Patriarchs in rabbinic eyes. Rather than denuding the biblical text of meaning, as opponents of source criticism often aver, this instance offers a counterexample.

Thus we have three instances from Genesis 37 – the brothers' hatred of Joseph, Joseph's encounter with the mysterious stranger, and the sale of Joseph. All three can be approached in numerous ways, and not only the ones that I have called here "literary," "rabbinic" and "critical." In each case, I have favored the analysis that best explains the text, its problems, its teachings, and its depth. I want to underscore that these are definitely different modes of analysis, that they are axiomatically inconsistent, and that my standard of which to employ is admittedly subjective. In my view, the answer to Steinmetz's question 'how does one read a text?' may include several right answers, depending not only on the reader, but also on the particular text. I end with a question to the readers of this Bible site: did

[16] My thanks to The Torah/Project Tabs for this helpful breakdown of the sale of Joseph. See Ben Sandler, "Encountering the Documentary Hypothesis in the Joseph Story" on VaYeshev, The Torah/Project Tabs http://thetorah.com/all-parshas. For further analysis of this chapter, see Joel Baden, *Reviving the Documentary Hypothesis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

[17] The J or Jahvist and E or Elohist are two of the four principal sources in the Documentary Hypothesis and the two bets represented in the Joseph story.

you find the battery of approaches used here illuminating or muddled? Please let me know.