Tragic Ascent:

Joseph’s refusal to fall into the depths of divine grace and will

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The story of Joseph troubles the minds of many biblical interpreters, frequents the pages of didactic sermons, and hangs as a mysterious ending to Genesis’ lessons to wisdom seekers. Why would the book of beginnings, the Biblical story of human history meant to construct a foundation on which to process all later texts, end on the account of such an ambiguous character as Joseph? Furthermore, many rabbinic scholars interpret the Torah’s treatment of Joseph’s character as being critical and negative. Aaron Wildavsky in *Assimilation versus Separation*, writes, “Joseph is tried and found interesting, even admirable in some respects, but is ultimately found wanting.” The Torah seems to clearly suggest that despite Joseph’s heightened traits and personal agency, “[Joseph] is not the one through whom the moral law will be brought to the people of Israel.” What then is inherently wrong with Joseph that causes him to stand as a break in God’s efforts of pedagogy in Genesis and requires God to initiate a new beginning with his covenant people? What constitutes Joseph as the predecessor of the “path not taken,” that which all faithful and God-centered people should deny? Joseph, the quintessential success story, is not deemed morally inferior based on his ample haves. Rather, like other Hebrew forefathers, Joseph’s lack of experience and understanding prevent him from being an exemplary model of Biblical leadership. Joseph’s failed initiation dismembers him from the Israelite clan. His choices to relentlessly pursue power and neglect the Israelite way have dire consequences: everyone is enslaved. From Joseph’s tremendous conceit to his rupture with the Israelite nation, Joseph’s failures to embody the way of God’s chosen people ultimately stem from his failed initiation.

Most Ancient Near Eastern and even modern cultures relied on a process of

2 Wildavsky, 196.
initiation whereby a body of rites and oral teachings were used to weave an initiate into the religious and social fabric of the community. Mircea Eliade explains initiation as:

Equivalent to a basic change in existential condition; the novice emerges from his ordeal endowed with a totally different being from that which he possessed before his initiation; he has become another. ³

Symbols of death are heavily employed to represent the annihilation of one’s old and childish self in order for one to be resurrected into a responsible and spiritual member of the community. Death itself symbolizes a return to primitive chaos, the abyss of creation, where one’s egotistic and ignorant way of being is overcome by an encounter with the sacred. As Eliade states, “Initiatory death is indispensable for the beginning of spiritual life.” ⁴ Through different ceremonies and rituals, the novice is prepared to accept the spiritual values and sacred wisdom of his/her community.

In our first in-depth encounter of Joseph, the text mentions that Joseph is seventeen years old. This puts Joseph past the cusp of puberty, the liminal age where a boy would normally receive “transition rites” or initiation in archaic society. ⁵ However, Joseph does not display any signs of humility, death, or corporate understanding that would accompany an initiated man. In fact, Joseph appears completely unconquered and self-centered almost to the point of being narcissistic.

In his first interaction, Joseph approaches his brothers and commands them saying, “Listen to this dream that I dreamed.” ⁶ One can only imagine Joseph, the second youngest wearing the pompous robe his father bestowed on him, walking as if he were holding court and approaching his brothers who are laboring over the herd.

⁴ Eliade, xiv.
⁵ Eliade, xiv.
⁶ Genesis 37: 6 (NRSV Harper Collins Study Bible)
depicts his first dream saying:

There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf.  

Jacob’s sons, probably well accustomed to their brother’s vanity, decipher the dream for what it truly is: a lustful desire for power and domination. They scold their brother and ask, “Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?”

But there is reason to believe that Joseph’s brothers fail to see the full implications of the dream. As Wildavsky writes, “Only with Joseph and the Egyptians do we see the self-centered ‘I dreamed a dream,’ as if they had worked it up themselves.” Throughout the rest of Genesis, God is the creator of dreams. Joseph’s ownership over the dream is a claim foreign to the Israelite nation and reveals his propensity for hubris and ambition, both hallmarks of Egyptian rule.

Despite the scolding of his brothers, Joseph’s ego is not in the slightest way deflated. He immediately resurfaces with another dream, but this time Joseph demands the attention of his entire family. Joseph exclaims, “Look, I have had another dream: the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me.” Jacob’s reply to Joseph clearly shows that there is something seriously wrong about Joseph’s dream and its implications. Jacob rebukes his son and says, “What kind of dream is this that you have had? Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow to the ground before you?” The rhetorical question addresses Joseph’s conscience and warrants a response of remorse. Joseph responds with nothing of the sort and Jacob notes Joseph’s

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7 Gen. 37: 7
8 Gen. 37: 8a
9 Wildavsky, 71.
10 Gen 37: 9
11 Gen 37: 10
dangerous dreams and shameless behavior. Could it be that Jacob is most disturbed by
Joseph’s lack of personal development and his own failure to develop Joseph in the ways
of the clan?

Eventually Joseph’s conduct causes his brothers to wholeheartedly hate him and
drives his father beyond suspicion. To all, it is clear that there is something not right with
Joseph. Yet the clan does not completely give up on Joseph’s development and growth.
Since Joseph lacks any true sign of initiation, his family embarks on a final mission to
initiate their childish kin. Two episodes that are usually seen as intending to harm Joseph
can be interpreted as familial devotion to Joseph’s education. The first attempt to correct
Joseph is made by Jacob who is said to have “loved Joseph more than any other of his
children.” 12 Jacob summons Joseph saying, “Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at
Shechem? Come, I will send you to them.” 13 Two things are significant about Jacob’s
sending of Joseph. Shechem is the site where Jacob’s sons, in response to Dinah’s rape,
slaughtered all the male residents. Jacob knowingly sends Joseph into a place of tension
and violence. Jacob must also be well aware of his sons’ hatred of Joseph and that to
send Joseph far from his sight to his brothers could bring a disaster. In this land of chaos,
Jacob hopes Joseph’s old self will be destroyed and a new and more pious individual will
be created. Joseph answers, “Here I am,” and is sent to his possible doom. 14 Leon R.
Kass suggests, “Jacob’s ‘Go, please,’ and Joseph’s Here-am-I”—eerily echo the story of
the binding of Isaac, a story of another father’s willingness to sacrifice his beloved son.”

15 Jacob gives Joseph over to the hands of God undoubtedly hoping that he will survive

12 Gen 37: 3a
13 Gen 37: 13a
14 Gen. 37: 13b
yet also encounter some transformative experience of death.

The second attempt to reform Joseph, made by his brothers, is perhaps less convincing than the first yet still significant. The brothers see Joseph coming and are immediately overcome by violence and hatred. Genesis reads:

They said to one another, ‘Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams.’  

Here, the reader, readies him/herself for another blood bath in Shechem. However, the elder brothers reason with the group. Reuben, the eldest and the rightful leader, claims authority and addresses his brothers saying, “Shed no blood; throw him in a pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him.”  

The text reveals Reuben’s motive to “rescue [Joseph] out of their hand and restore him to his father.” Perhaps lowering Joseph into a pit is all that Reuben thinks will take to humble his younger brother. Yet, the brothers are unconvinced by Reuben’s strategy and Judah more ably addresses his brothers saying, “What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.”  

The brothers agree with the brilliant plan set forth by Judah. Selling Joseph into slavery would completely strip him of his connection to Jacob and, therefore, deprive Joseph of his inheritance. If nothing in the past had served as a means of initiating Joseph, slavery might, in the very least, put Joseph in a place of desperation where he would be forced to call upon the sacred name of God for aid.

Contrary to expectations, Jacob is never broken or transformed in the bonds of

16 Gen. 37: 19-20  
17 Gen 37: 22a  
18 Gen 37: 22b  
19 Gen. 37: 26-27
slavery. All attempts to lower Joseph fail, and the text reveals that, under his new Egyptian master, Joseph flourishes. Genesis reads, “So Joseph found favor in his sight and attended him; he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had.” The LORD is said to be with Joseph, but it is not very clear how God is present. Joseph never once prays or calls out to the LORD in despair nor does he thank the LORD for his good fortune. Is the LORD’s presence mentioned simply because Joseph appears successful? Whatever the case, Joseph remains entirely reliant on his own wit and ability. Not once does Joseph entertain large questions pertaining to his success or existence. To the reader, Joseph appears to think that he is the perfect center of his world. When Joseph is thrown in prison due to accusations of sexual harassment from his mistress, Joseph immediately sets out on a mission to secure his own survival. Joseph never hesitates to observe his ambitious drive or look out on the world through anything other than his introspective lens.

While in prison, Joseph capitalizes on another opportunity to use dreams in his ascent to control his surroundings. The Pharaoh throws the chief baker and chief cupbearer into the same prison as Joseph. Knowing the connection each share with the Pharaoh, Joseph observes the situation—ready to manipulate any arising situation for his own benefit. Genesis reads:

One night they both dreamed—the cupbearer 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.  

Joseph capitalizes on their distress and, with the cunningness of the serpent of Eden, asks questions that cover up his true motive of control. Joseph asks, “Do not interpretations

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20 Gen. 39: 4
21 Gen. 40: 5
belong to God?” implying that interpretation is a divine gift. Yet, he follows his question saying, “Please tell them to me.” 22 Is Joseph slyly claiming to be God-like in his abilities?

Joseph then goes on to interpret the two men’s dreams in the same manner his brothers interpreted his childhood dreams. Joseph uses the details of each dream to pick apart the state of each man’s conscience. Joseph realizes each man’s agency over his own dreams. Similar to the way Jacob’s sons were able to judge Joseph as power-hungry by the dreams he dreamt, Joseph is able to proclaim one prisoner as guilty and the other innocent based of the content of their dreams. Joseph’s success in piecing together the men’s consciences and dreams as one body does not lead him to ponder the connection between his own interior thoughts and his childhood dreams. Joseph never fully realizes the implications of having himself “dreamt a dream.” Joseph’s only concern is the reward he hopes to receive from rightly interpreting the others’ dreams. Had the dreams been from powerless individuals with no political connections, Joseph would have had no interest at all.

Joseph finally gets the break he has been waiting for when the Egyptian court calls upon him to interpret Pharaoh’s dream. After waiting long and refining his masterful wit, Joseph first decides to shave himself and change clothes before meeting with the Pharaoh. Having never put his trust and faith in the Israelite community and God through initiation, Joseph shamelessly tries on a foreign identity in order to ascend. Joseph knows that to be successful in an Egyptian world he must become an Egyptian. This physical change represents a clear break with Joseph’s Hebrew identity.

The events that follow mark the beginning of Joseph’s Egyptianization and are

22 Gen. 40: 8b
later foiled by the story of Daniel in the Hebrew Bible. The character of Daniel appears in the Jewish exile in Babylon and is brought twice before King Nebuchadnezzar to interpret dreams. Unlike Joseph who takes on foreign customs even before he gains favor of Pharaoh, Daniel refuses to “defile himself with the royal rations of food and wine” and remains true to Jewish law and morality. In fact, Daniel’s steadfast faithfulness lands him in a lion’s den when his prayers to Yahweh break the law under King Darius. Daniel maintains that it is “God in heaven who reveals mysteries” and, in his interpretation of the King’s dream, Daniel simply relays the sacred without any concern for his own well being.

However, Joseph cleverly reads himself and not God into the famine that he interprets Pharaoh’s dreams as depicting. Joseph tells Pharaoh, “It is not I; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer.” But Joseph never receives a vision from God, whereas Daniel does, and Joseph gives Pharaoh a solution to the famine that counters divine activity. Although he never prays or communicates with God, Joseph deceptively uses God’s name to establish his own authority for interpreting Pharaoh’s dream. Joseph referring to the famine, states, “It is as I told Pharaoh; God has shown to Pharaoh what he is about to do.” If the famine to come is God’s doing, then Joseph’s scheme to save Egypt is an effort to control and mitigate God. Joseph is caught in his concern for survival and his desire to please the ruler and system he believes are accountable for his success. Therefore, he is unable to view his scheme for saving Pharaoh as anything other than a means to his own secure and powerful end. Joseph’s self-absorption makes him unable to vision with any foresight or corporate thinking so as to determine what is good

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23 Daniel 1: 8a  
24 Gen. 41: 16  
25 Gen. 41: 28
for the Israelite community. Joseph never entertains the thought that God may intend for the destruction of Egypt.

When Daniel negatively interprets Nebuchadnezzar’s dream telling the king, “You shall be driven away from human society, and your dwelling shall be with the wild animals,” he does not pose a way to undo the king’s impending doom other than pleading to the LORD Almighty. Daniel fearlessly admonishes the King saying, “atone for your sins with righteousness, and your iniquities with mercy to the oppressed, so that your prosperity may be prolonged.” While Joseph envisions himself as a God-like figure and reads himself into every situation, Daniel acknowledges his small place amidst the mysteries of God’s activity, the humble mark of an initiated man. Daniel tells King Nebuchadnezzar:

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\text{But as for me, this mystery has not been revealed to me because of any wisdom that I have more than any other living being, but in order that the interpretation may be known to the king and that you may understand the thoughts of your mind.}
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Daniel never puts a concern for self-preservation or power over his devotion to his God and community, and, because of this, Daniel securely rests in the abundance of God’s grace and protection. Daniel faces death with familiarity and knows that his fate is out of his control. Being initiated into the body of God’s people, Daniel prays for corporate salvation of his nation and takes on any sin or trouble of Israel as his own. It is Daniel who bears the fruit of initiation that Joseph so evidently lacks.

When analyzing the Egyptian culture, one gets a full glimpse of Joseph’s underdeveloped and self-contained character. In Egypt, Joseph is the perfect model of assimilation: he wears Egyptian clothing, marries the daughter of an Egyptian priest, and

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26 Dan. 4: 25a
27 Dan. 4: 27b
28 Dan. 2: 30
rides around in a chariot. Due to Joseph’s display of wisdom in response to Pharaoh’s
dream, Pharaoh puts Joseph in charge of his house and all the land of Egypt. Pharaoh
gives Joseph an Egyptian name, Zaphenath-paneah, that according to Kass may mean
“the creator or sustainer of life.” 29 Joseph’s dreams of complete self-reliance and
universal dominion finally seem to be coming true. And what better place for them to
come true than Egypt, the zenith of civilization? According to Kass, “In its highly
successful efforts to make the world safe and comfortable for human life, Egypt places its
trust in technology and administration; it pays scant attention to ruling the unruly hearts
and minds of men.” 30

Like Joseph, Egypt does not worship the divine nor does it revere creation;
instead it seeks to control both. Practices of shaving, mummification, and divination all
seek to defy the power of change. Egypt does not abide by any source of esoteric
wisdom and, while they are captivated by the mystery of life and death as C.J. Bleeker
points out, they believe the two powers can be both reconciled and controlled through
resurrection. Considering similar points to these, C. J. Bleeker writes, “it needs to be
understood clearly that rites of initiation, in the strict sense of the word, may not be
expected to have existed in Ancient Egypt.” 31 Initiation cannot hold weight in a land
where men are Gods. Instead of deferring to the LORD in worship and promulgating the
ways of his father, Joseph becomes the chief sustainer of a hierarchical land where man’s
reign is supreme.

Throughout the text Joseph is given chances to surrender from his conceited
charades and return to the God of Israel. In fact, at the very moment Joseph reaches the

29 Kass, 569.
30 Kass, 626
pinnacle of Egyptian success, the line of Jacob reappears as if to give Joseph a second
chance. His brothers, in search for food, come to Egypt and bow in awe to an
extravagant governor who they do not realize as their brother Joseph. Genesis reads,
“When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them, but he treated them like strangers
and spoke harshly to them. ‘Where do you come from?’” 32 Joseph completely
disassociates himself from his brothers and his land and denies them hospitality.
Juxtaposed with Abraham, the father of the covenant, and his gracious hospitality to real
strangers, this incident shows Joseph is not suited to lead God’s people.

Joseph takes his inhospitality a step further by accusing his brothers saying, “You
are spies; you have come to see the nakedness of the land.” 33 It is evident that nothing
has changed for Joseph. He continues to make “bad report” of his brothers as he did as a
child. Also, through his accusation, Joseph covers up his real and personal fear that his
brothers have come to undo his composed countenance and strip his vanity and ambition
naked as they had done before. Therefore, while in complete control, Joseph masterfully
toys with his brothers.

The fact that his brothers have inadvertently bowed to Joseph, a fulfillment of his
very own dreams, does not satisfy Joseph’s thirst for control. Joseph frames and
imprisons his brothers and sends them back to retrieve their father’s beloved Benjamin in
order to demonstrate to his family and, perhaps, himself that he is indeed all-powerful. In
his first speech to his brothers after having revealed himself, Joseph immediately
establishes his authority stating, “God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant
on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors.” 34 It is clear that Joseph, the

32 Gen. 42:7a
33 Gen. 42:7b
34 Gen. 45: 7
ultimate provider, has nothing to receive from his brothers or their Hebrew identity. Later on, Joseph again reassures them saying, “So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.” 35 Wildavsky explains the divine claim Joseph makes writing, “The formula ‘fear not’ is the same phrase God used to reassure his patriarchs Jacob, Abram, and Isaac at Beersheba.” 36 How could Joseph, who was unable to prevent himself from falling into the hands of slavery, claim to have the unmovable control over the destiny of his brothers and their children?

Joseph’s vain conception of self-importance leads him to continue serving himself through further empowering the system of his benefactor, the Pharaoh. In his plan to counter the famine, Joseph makes the entire population indebted to Pharaoh. Joseph does this without any foresight of its consequences for the nation of Israel or concept of corporate justice, two powerful tools ingrained into the philosophy of Hebrew patriarchs such as Abraham and Moses. Joseph can only think as far as his own wellbeing because he is never initiated into a larger existence. Unbeknownst to Joseph, his plan will ultimately lead to the Pharaoh’s complete hegemony and the enslavement of the Israelite nation.

However bleak Joseph appears as a model of God’s chosen path, some do argue in favor of his character. Professor Marc Galanter argues against the assimilation of Joseph and even contends that Joseph “[transmits] a robust Jewish identity to his children.” 37 Galanter states, “Thus Joseph is the model of the “modern” Jew who manages to have it both ways—to remain Jewish while participating fully in the world of his place and time.

35 Gen. 50: 21a
36 Wildavsky, 156.
37 Wildavsky, 151.
without abandoning his Jewish.” 38 To Galanter, Joseph embodies a “movement away from the center, embrace of surroundings, incorporation of the outside, addressing the tensions of moral action in the big world rather than ‘building a fence’.” 39

This overly generous portrayal of Joseph as a bridge-builder lacks sound evidence in the text. One’s character and alliance is usually quite evident in the company one keeps at meals. Genesis makes mention of the fact that, when Joseph sits to eat with his brothers, the Egyptians “served him by himself, and [his brothers] by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves, because the Egyptians could not eat with the Hebrews.” 40 Joseph is no citizen of the world or ultimate universal man. Joseph sits alone as a self-absorbed island. Without the ability to think corporately, Joseph is unable to belong to any collective group and face the moral tensions present in his world or ours. Joseph’s own Jewishness can be called into question. As Wildavsky writes, “Judaism says submit to God and not to man. Joseph comes close to saying that submission to Pharaoh reflects God’s will.” 41 The Hebrew tradition begs “what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” 42 Yet with all his great faculties, Joseph falls terribly short of what is good in the eyes of God. Joseph’s progress and ambition may make him a model of the modern man but not one who lives according to the way of God’s chosen people.

Is Joseph to blame for his own failure to be initiated into his father’s way? Wouldn’t the mere fact that Joseph fails to take up his father’s way suggest that some responsibility falls back on Jacob? Jacob, after all, is not known to be a great moral
educator of his children and wrestled with the will of God throughout his life. It’s possible that Joseph was never properly initiated in the first place by Jacob and had no source of moral correction or tutelage in the wisdom of the Israelites. However, Moses, who supercedes Joseph and is the progenitor of the moral law of the Hebrew Bible, was raised and nurtured by the Egyptians but identified himself as a servant of God and a member of the Israelite nation. Moses, unlike Joseph, takes heed to God’s way and understands that a “man is made—he does not make himself all by himself.” ⁴³ Whether Joseph’s tragic hubris and shortcomings are due to his surrounding community or a flaw in his own character, Joseph’s story is an admonition to God’s people. Only those initiated into God’s community and conquered by the mystery of God’s glory will transmit the moral life and culture of God’s people.

⁴³ Eliade, xiv.