

## Death and Dreams in Genesis: A Critical Response to Alan Levenson's *Joseph*

Jacob L. Goodson, *Southwestern College*

Lindsey Keith, *King's College London*

Jewish historian and philosopher Alan Levenson dedicates a whole book to the character of Joseph in the book of Genesis. While there are several arguments and insights that a critical response might consider, we find his book most helpful and provocative for what it teaches us about *dreaming* and *dying*. In what follows, we argue that Levenson's account of Joseph's dreams and his death pulls this biblical narrative into the 21<sup>st</sup> century because it provides a balanced approach for the need to challenge one's familial identity—which results from Joseph's dreams—and redefine one's family identity based upon the virtue of faith—which Joseph does at the time of his death.

### Introducing Levenson's *Joseph*

Throughout *Joseph*, Levenson seems less concerned with the so-called historical truth of the story and characters of the Joseph narrative. Levenson tends to be more focused on how the story gets treated within the Jewish tradition. He presents Jewish interpretations of Joseph using both traditional rabbinic commentaries and modern scholarship, weaving together traditional and modern views and providing a deep and multi-layered interpretation of the story. Levenson is also focused on the literary question of how Joseph's character is developed throughout the narrative, writing, "Joseph's character develops from abrasive youth to wise old age, but he remains a cryptic figure, no doubt rooted in his difficult upbringing."<sup>1</sup>

The personal journey of Joseph is closely tied to the role of his family, and dreams are a crucial theme of this difficult journey: they build Joseph's confidence, increase Joseph's status as favored son, and deepen the hate his brothers have toward him. Joseph, amongst many other siblings, is favored by his father, Jacob. His brothers despise Joseph for being young and favored, and Joseph's dreams only increase the tension between the brothers.

What is the role of Joseph's family in his two dreams? The first dream begins with him and his brothers, working in the fields and gathering up stocks of grain. Then Joseph's stock stands up tall, while his brother's stocks bow down to his stock (see Genesis 37). He tells his brothers of his dream and they become more hateful toward Joseph. This is the only dream where any family members of Joseph's appear explicitly. In his second dream, we learn that the sun, moon, and eleven stars bow down to Joseph. Joseph's father Jacob assumes that the sun, moon, and stars are representative of the family—the sun being the father, the moon being the mother, and the stars being the siblings—but we are not told that Joseph or his brothers assumed the symbols of the sun, moon, and stars to be family members. Nonetheless, the dreams create the greatest hate for Joseph among his brothers, because the dreams entail that they will bow down to Joseph. This resentment

---

<sup>1</sup> Alan T. Levenson., *Joseph: Portraits through the Ages* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 2016), xvii; page numbers will be cited parenthetically in the text.

would culminate in the brothers' sale of Joseph away from his home and family and into slavery at the age of seventeen, after which he would end up in Egypt.

However, if Joseph were only capable of having dreams and not interpreting them, the story would have ended here. After he is sold into slavery, Joseph serves Potiphar and then is wrongly placed in jail. Joseph gets out of jail through his ability to interpret the baker's, the cupbearer's, and then Pharaoh's dreams. By correctly interpreting Pharaoh's dream, Joseph gains the trust of Pharaoh and is placed in position of power and authority in Egypt; Joseph is able to fulfill the prophecy of his dreams through his ability to interpret other people's dreams.

### **The Significance of Joseph's Dreams**

For readers who wish to track our argument in relation to the content of the biblical narratives, this section considers aspects of passages found in the following chapters of Genesis: 37, 40, 41, 46. Our primary claim is that dreams function in Joseph's biblical narrative as a way to re-imagine one's identity outside of familial relationships. In contemporary U.S.A., we tend to define ourselves primarily in relation to the family of which we find ourselves: first, the family of our childhood; second, the family that results from one's romantic relationship. Joseph's biblical narrative challenges this tendency in how to define identity. Perhaps surprisingly, this challenge comes to us through dreams.

To defend this claim, we begin with a general point and then work toward some particulars found both in the biblical narrative, itself, and in the Talmud. Levenson concludes his chapter on dreams with these observations:

Viewed from the perspective of Genesis 37, Joseph's dreams provoke the brothers more than anything else. Viewed from the continuation of the story, Joseph's abilities at dream interpretation propel him to the heights of power. His own dreams are impressive.... Does God feed Joseph his interpretations, are they the product of his acute intelligence, or is this dichotomy too modern? (Levenson, 46).

Out of respect for his brothers and for the sake of peacefulness with them, Joseph could have ignored the fact and content of his dreams. Instead, he creates a situation in which the fact and content of his dreams angers and provokes his brothers "more than anything else." After two years<sup>2</sup> in prison, Joseph's ability to interpret dreams provides a way toward freedom and power. Joseph's dreams distance him from his family, and his dreams provide him with a new position working for/with the Pharaoh.<sup>3</sup> The significance of dreams in this biblical narrative is that they become the instruments for Joseph to challenge identifying with his family—particularly his brothers—and forging a new identity in relation to achieving position and power within the world.

---

<sup>2</sup> This is an estimation on the time that Joseph spent in prison. We know from Gen. 37: 2 that he was seventeen years old when his brothers sold him into slavery. We also know that Joseph was thirty years old when he began to serve Pharaoh (Gen. 41:46). That leaves thirteen years between, where Joseph was a slave to Potiphar then in prison. Gen. 41 reveals that two years after Joseph has interpreted the cupbearer's dream, Pharaoh began having his dream that would lead to Joseph's release. Therefore, we can conclude that Joseph spent at least two years in jail, most likely more than two years, but less than thirteen years.

<sup>3</sup> On the significance of "Pharaoh" instead of "King of Egypt," see Levenson, 39.

Levenson emphasizes that this is not only a drama of family tensions but also a political drama. Joseph rises to leadership and power in Egypt, a country usually viewed unfavorably by the Jewish people, but which, during this narrative, is viewed more positively. Some modern scholars decline to treat the “Egyptian” part of the story, because they find it less interesting. Levenson, however, believes that this is a big mistake, as the transition between Genesis and Exodus occurs because of Joseph’s role in Egypt (see Levenson, xviii).

Indeed, Joseph’s new identity ought to be considered quite controversial since it involves the alleged enemy of the Tanakh: Pharaoh! On this particular point, Levenson tells us that Joseph’s narrative presents a challenge to the dominant view—found within the Tanakh—that Pharaoh serves as a necessary villain in relation to God’s people. Consider the implications of this narrative for contemporary presuppositions concerning the priority of family over politics: Joseph’s dreams anger his brothers to the point of selling him out of the family, and his ability to interpret dreams leads him into a positive relationship with Pharaoh and other Egyptians. Through Joseph’s eyes, Levenson infers, the Egyptians are not the enemy but “seem a mixed lot, like the rest of us” (Levenson, 214). Levenson concludes without telling his readers how radical this is, even still today, that the “negative verdict of Egypt, no doubt present in the Bible at large, seems muted in the Joseph story” (Levenson, 214). Joseph not only cozies up to Pharaoh, but the biblical narrative suggests that Joseph’s identity becomes wrapped up by the position and power he enjoys from Pharaoh.

Of course, Joseph’s position and power do not come from Pharaoh. Joseph’s character gets authorized by God, which seems to be the main point of the dreams. When Levenson asks, “Does God feed Joseph his interpretations, are they the product of his acute intelligence, or is this dichotomy too modern?” he leads his readers to conclude the third option: modern readers need to come to the intellectual place where we affirm *both* that Joseph possesses “acute intelligence” *and* that God fed Joseph the dreams and his interpretations. To affirm only Joseph’s intelligence falls into the alleged trap set by Sigmund Freud’s *Interpretations of Dreams* (see Levenson, 24-25), and to affirm only God’s role unnecessarily takes away the agency that the narrative seems to be granting to Joseph. With this turn toward the theological significance of Joseph’s dreams, we can claim that God intends for Joseph’s identity to shift from the familial to the political. The question becomes, does God intend this only for biblical characters or for all us? If intended for all us, then this biblical narrative provides a profound and prophetic critique of our assumptions as Americans: defining ourselves primarily in relation to the family of which we find ourselves. Joseph refuses to shy away from offending his brothers and, instead, embraces his change in identity made possible by God.

While Joseph is in prison, he is placed in the same cell as the cupbearer and the baker. They both have dreams one night that leave them troubled with no one to interpret them (Gen. 40:8). Joseph notices their distress, tells them that interpretations of dreams belong to God, and asks them to share their dreams with him (Gen. 40:8). Levenson writes, “Joseph steps up to the plate and asks for a swing at the troublesome dream(s). Note that Joseph has no training as an interpreter of other people’s dreams” (Levenson, 35). After hearing the cupbearer’s dream, Joseph reveals the meaning of his dream with a favorable outcome. The cupbearer is to be restored to his place serving Pharaoh. Joseph asks to be remembered when the cupbearer regains his favor with Pharaoh. Here, we see Joseph’s reliance on God and his own intelligence working together. Joseph also reveals his

innocent and righteous past to the cupbearer, which, as Levenson shows, reveals Joseph's resentment from the events in Genesis 37 when he was "stolen" from the land of Hebrews (see Levenson, 37). Joseph accurately interprets both dreams, and they are fulfilled after three days. However, the cupbearer does not remember Joseph after being restored to serve Pharaoh. Levenson writes, "Not only are we given a view into the cupbearer's lack of gratitude, but we are also reminded that the solution to Joseph's problem, ultimately, lies with God" (Levenson, 37). Here, we see reliance on God emphasized over Joseph's own intelligence.

Another two years pass, and Pharaoh has a dream that leaves him troubled. He seeks interpretations from magicians and wise men, but none can interpret the dream (Gen. 41:8). This seems to jog the cupbearer's memory, and he tells Pharaoh of a young Hebrew servant in jail that correctly interpreted his dream. Pharaoh sends for Joseph. He shaves and is clothed, both signs of elevation (see Levenson, 41), before meeting Pharaoh. He correctly interprets Pharaoh's dream, claiming again that interpretation come through God but also through his intelligence (Gen. 41:16). Levenson writes, "Pharaoh's dream takes place at the banks of the Nile, the lifeline of the nation" (Levenson, 39). Joseph is aware of this, as well as the symbolism of the numbers in the dream. Thus, although Joseph claims again that interpretation comes through God (Gen. 41:16), his own acumen also comes into play. As a result, Pharaoh places Joseph as second in command in Egypt (less powerful only than Pharaoh). Joseph's days of misfortune have come to an end, and his political reign begins.

In the Talmud, the early rabbis offer us insight into the connection between Joseph and his family. In the Talmud, this connection does not limit itself to Joseph and his brothers, but it extends to Joseph and his mother. The early rabbis claim that, in the dreams, "the moon symbolizes Joseph's mother" (quoted in Levenson, 43). According to Levenson, "Joseph's mother is dead—she cannot bow down to him in Egypt." Levenson continues, "By the time the brothers bow down to Joseph, Rachel is long dead, and Joseph is burdened by a multitude of responsibilities" (Levenson, 43). For the early rabbis to make the modal claim that Joseph's mother *would have* bowed down to Joseph in the Egyptian court demonstrates how Joseph's shift in identity should be considered conceptually complete but not practically complete. Joseph's mother does not know of this new Joseph. The early rabbis go as far as to say that the dreams remain unfulfilled in this sense: the adult Joseph does not have an opportunity to declare his new identity to the one who gave life to the young Joseph.

Lastly, the Talmud does not shy away from discussing Joseph's cozy relationship with the Pharaoh. According to Levenson, "The Talmud seems to draw on Joseph's remarkable policies which, truth, were what turned Pharaoh's dream of feast and famine to the good" (Levenson, 44). Levenson labels this as "Joseph's pragmatic use of Pharaoh's dream" (Levenson, 45), which goes unchallenged by the early rabbis. Joseph's identity as part of the Egyptian court is taken as a "blessing" that God bestows upon Joseph's character. Why is this shift in identity, from the familial to the political or the worldly, not considered a "blessing" in the "present age" (Kierkegaard's phrase) for Christians and Jews today?

### The Significance of Joseph's Death

We seem to be stuck in a bad binary, perhaps a fallacy of false dichotomy, concerning how adult children relate to their familial identity. If we make the claim that adult children should forge their own identity in their adulthood, separate from their family, then this tends to get interpreted as a total negation of one's familial identity. Again, Joseph's narrative challenges this modern American tendency. Joseph's Egyptian identity might anger and offend his brothers, but Joseph's new identity empowers him to re-define his relationship with his brothers. We learn this in how Genesis narrates Joseph's death.

Toward the end of his life, we see that Joseph's character remarkably affirms all of his identities and those connected with his identities. First, Levenson explains how this works in relation to his brothers and their families:

On his death bed, Joseph assures his brothers [and] his brothers' families...that God will see to their condition and bring them back up from Egypt (Gen. 50:24-25). The verb employed by Joseph in this pronouncement, "to visit, appoint, designate" (*pakod/yifkod*) can be a strong one, signaling God's direct intervention (Levenson, 204-205).

Joseph re-defines his relationship with his family in the exclusive terms of God's promises. Joseph's confidence concerning God's promises results from "faith" (see Hebrews 11:22; quoted by Levenson, 205). This seems to be reiterated throughout Jewish and Christian scriptures: in the narrative of Abraham in Genesis 22, in the story of Joseph at the end of Genesis, *and* Jesus of Nazareth (Matthew 10 of several possibilities).

Second, Levenson explains how Joseph's character takes into consideration those involved with his political identity:

Joseph makes the Israelites swear to bring his bones up from Egypt with them to Canaan. "When God has taken notice of you, you shall carry up my bones from here" (Gen. 50:25)... The last verse of Genesis concludes with the word "Egypt"...and is suitably ominous... "Joseph died at the age of one hundred and ten years; and he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt" (Gen. 50:26). The Bible gives no explanation why Joseph's remains could not be transported back to Canaan.... Midrash offers three principal reasons: war, wizardry, worthiness. First, the border between Egypt and Canaan was closed; second, Pharaoh's magicians opposed letting the remains of this good luck talisman out of the country; third, no one before Moses merited transporting Joseph's bones.... Moreover the transition from Genesis to Exodus, while artful, is terse. Israel comes down, multiplies, and becomes a nation in eight verses. But since this process took four hundred years, readers naturally want...details on the intervening years, and the more natural extension was forward from the deceased Joseph, not backward from the infant Moses (Levenson, 205, 206).

Joseph's new identity/identities—Egyptian, political, and worldly—determines the transition from the books of Genesis to Exodus. Egypt is literally the final word of Genesis, and Joseph remains on Egyptian soil. He requests to be moved, but this request is not granted by the time Genesis ends. Note two of the midrashic points: those who Joseph out-performed and replaced—"Pharaoh's magicians"—might be the ones who want Joseph's remains to stay in Egypt, and no one in Joseph's family was deemed worthy to touch or transport his bones. His Egyptian identity finds fulfillment in his death. Yet, as defended in the first point, Joseph does not deny his familial identity—he only re-

defines it. Because of this, Levenson's conclusion about Joseph's character in the bounds of the narrative stays true for us today: "Joseph remains an elusive hero and cryptic character" (Levenson, 47). What shall we make of Joseph's ability to re-make himself (or to be re-made by God) as a politically powerful and worldly Egyptian, re-define his familial relationships because of his faith, and hold onto all of these competing identities?

### Conclusion

As two Christians trained in American philosophy (Goodson) and Methodist theology (Keith), we cannot help but connect Levenson's presentation of Joseph's character with the work of the American ethicist and Methodist theologian Stanley Hauerwas. Although he has changed his mind or clarified his position on several issues over the course of his career, one constant criticism found throughout his work concerns the idolatry of familial identity in American Christianity. While Hauerwas's position is caricatured and judged hypocritical by some of his critics,<sup>4</sup> Hauerwas continually calls American Christians to (a) re-define their familial relationships based upon the demands of faith and discipleship and (b) think through the idolatrous implications of prioritizing one's identity and loyalty to one's family.<sup>5</sup> Although Hauerwas does not take the easy way and name these idolatrous implications in terms of "isms," we do so for the sake of brevity. The idolatrous implications of prioritizing one's identity and loyalty to one's family include nationalism (not welcoming immigrants and refugees because of a false sense of safety and security), racism (prioritizing one's biological family over the racial "other"), and sexism (thinking that God has ordained roles for men and women that look more like 1950s America rather than Paul's vision for the church where there is "neither male nor female"). It strikes us that Levenson's account of Joseph's character provides a biblical narrative that offers scriptural substance and warrant to Hauerwas's continual call to American Christians to resist idolatry by avoiding loyalty to one's family. In modern terms: Joseph's loyalty seems to be to God first, his own position in the world second, and thirdly to return to his family at the time of his death. Perhaps the prudent conclusion to draw from both Joseph's character and Hauerwas's arguments involves learning to find the proper balance between affirming the identity/identities God makes possible for us while simultaneously challenging and re-defining one's familial identity.

---

<sup>4</sup> In his review of Hauerwas's memoir, *Hannah's Child*, Gilbert Meilaender accuses Hauerwas of contradicting his own arguments against Christians prioritizing their identities in terms of their familial relationships. Meilaender writes, "The first thing that seems clear at least to me is that it is not true that you [Stanley Hauerwas] disdain all natural ties. No one can read what you have written in this memoir about your son, Adam, or about your marriage, later in life, to Paula, and suppose that you disdain either of these natural ties. No one can read what you have written in this memoir about your parents and believe that you disdain all natural ties" (Meilaender, "A Dedicated Life: A Letter to Stanley Hauerwas," in *First Things*, [May 2010]: <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2010/05/a-dedicated-life>).

<sup>5</sup> We offer a published instance of this from each decade of Hauerwas's writing career; more instances could be cited as well. See Hauerwas, "Love's Not All You Need," in *Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection* (San Antonio, TX: Fides Publishers, Inc., 1974), chapter 6; "The Moral Value of the Family" & "The Family: Theological and Ethical Reflections," in *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), chapters 8 & 9; "Hating Mothers as the Way to Peace," in *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), chapter 13; *Matthew: A Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007); "Friendship and Freedom," in *Working with Words: On Learning to Speak Christian* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Press, 2011), chapter 21.