

Death and Dreams, Family and Faith: A Response to Goodson and Keith

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What an honor and a pleasure to have readers like Jacob Goodson and Lindsey Keith so willing to engage one's work. For a historian, this sentiment can only be amplified by having one's insinuations and tentative speculations tweaked into ethical claims and normative positions by trained philosophers and theologians. Before entering into Goodson's & Keith's (hereafter: GK) use of dreams and death to develop a position of Joseph's enduring significance as a contemporary model of grappling with individual faith and family identity, I would like to acknowledge how correctly and thoroughly GK understand what I was trying to accomplish and what I was not trying to accomplish in a book meant much more for a general Bible-reading audience than for scholars, an acknowledgment best made by simply stating my position vis-a-vis three major scholars.

First, GK rightly note that I am less concerned with the so-called historical truth of the story than "how the story gets treated within the Jewish tradition." This comes partly from my skepticism about what can be said with confidence about any biblical figure, especially one from Genesis. The reasons for this skepticism include, but do not nearly exhaust, such challenge-questions (*kushiyot*) as: What genre is the Joseph narrative anyway? Is the possibility of a Hyksos background in Genesis 37-50 enough to identify a "semitic" figure in Joseph? Even if there were an historical Joseph, why would one assume the narrator(s)' priority would be rendering that character in a way we would call historical? In truth, although I find archaeological and historical scholarship about the whens and wheres of the Egyptian background interesting when I read my monthly *BAR*, I am certain the proposed answers will remain inconclusive. Above all, my preference for impact over historicity is driven by Jewish thinker Ahad Haam's posture in "Moses" (1904),¹ itself an application of Nietzsche's three-fold division of historiographical types (e.g. monumental, antiquarian, critical).² Ahad Haam (1856-1927) concluded that the Moses that mattered (and matters) to Jewish history had nothing to do with an 'antiquarian Moses' and everything to do with a 'monumental Moses'—the Moses who shaped Jewish values through the ages. In this essay, Ahad Haam rejected antiquarian historians in favor of monumental history—as did Nietzsche. Whether Joseph existed is a guess. That Joseph intrigued subsequent readers, including biblical readers and pre-rabbinic ones, is beyond dispute. On this point, Nietzsche's distinctions in regard to historiography and Ahad Haam's application of this distinction to biblical narrative seems to me both correct and critical.

Second, GK rightly note that I reject the idea of the "Egyptian" part of the Joseph story as being either detachable from the family drama or uninteresting on its own terms. This position, that the family narrative and national narrative must be read together (synoptically, if you will) does not spring from any crypto-fundamentalism (e.g., I have no problem whatsoever with

¹ *Selected Essays of Ahad Ha'am*, ed. Leon Simon (Cleveland/Philadelphia: Meridian/Jewish Publication Society, 1962), 306-330.

² *The Philosophy of Nietzsche*, ed. Geoffrey Clive (New York: Signet, Signet Classics, 1965), 217-257.

regarding Joseph as a text authored by multiple hands), but rather, from a high regard for the work of the editor-redactor, a view not universally shared.³ Additionally, and consistent with my first point, I am loathe to dismiss what Psalm 105, Esther, Daniel, Ben Sirach, and later Second Temple authors thought was important—and Joseph’s role in Pharaoh’s court and rule over Egypt qualify in this regard for all of these above-mentioned ancient sources! I am also registering a not-so-minor dissent from Jan Assmann’s magisterial presentation of Egypt as the epitome of anti-Israelite ideology.⁴ Assmann’s brilliance notwithstanding, I just do not see his position in evidence in the Bible’s presentation of Pharaoh or Egypt in the Joseph story. Ethnocentric Ancient Israelite jibing at the inferiority of Egyptian magicians and wisemen compared to the Joseph the dream master, or, the over-willingness of Egyptians to barter their freedom for food (Gen 47: 13-27), does not strike me as the sustained anti-Egyptian polemic posited by Assmann.⁵ Since Egypt appears elsewhere in Genesis, but in its most sustained form in Joseph, this qualification to Assmann’s presentation does not seem so minor a matter.

Third, I am among those who have not been able to embrace James Kugel’s call in *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture Then and Now*⁶ to sharply differentiate between actual Bible scholarship (an essentially philological, archaeological and historical enterprise) from the study of post-biblical traditions (of which Kugel is also a master.) While several scholars have lodged direct rebuttals to Kugel’s view, I am neither learned enough as a Bible scholar nor skilled enough as a logician to do so.⁷ As with Assmann, all would concede that Kugel is a giant in the field and thoroughly grounded in the very material I traverse. Nevertheless, my *Joseph* book constitutes a narrative gesture aimed against his position, an attempt to show that biblical and post-biblical traditions can be combined in a way that scholars and devotional readers alike will find them aesthetically pleasing and intellectually coherent. These “academic” positions, and yet others, inform my book, but again, I thank GK for making explicit some positions inherent in my work and, with great originality, forwarding several views of their own, to which I turn.

GK correctly observe that Joseph’s dreams serve as an engine for independence from his birth family. They further observe that while Joseph’s own dreams (Gen. 37) require the least interpretation, were he able only to dream, but not to interpret the dreams of others, he would never attain the power, ultimately essential, to make his own dreams come true, at least in good measure. Commentators have not made this simple observation often enough, but I agree with GK that it is essential. GK expound the relation of Joseph’s dreams to his families in light of his family of birth and his romantic family. The Bible primarily expounds the first; Joseph’s relationship with the thrice-mentioned, but never characterized, Asenath, daughter of the priest of On, remains a missing story element that tantalized expositors from the Second Temple to today.

³ See recently Joel Baden, *The Composition of the Pentateuch: Renewing The Documentary Hypothesis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), for a presentation of the redactor as a mere compiler.

⁴ Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian* (Cambridge, MA : Harvard University Press, 1997).

⁵ I must concede that Nehama Leibowitz also sees this passage as anti-Egyptian polemic (*New Studies in Bereshit/Genesis* [Jerusalem: Hemed Press, 1954], 520-529).

⁶ James Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007) and his website, www.jameskugel.com.

⁷ See *Jewish Quarterly Review* (2010) devoted largely to Kugel’s work.

(See the ancient Greek novel *Aseneth*⁸ or Rembrandt van Rijn's brilliant oil "Jacob's Blessing" which actually makes Asenath a dominant figure in the scene, notwithstanding her complete absence from Genesis 48.) That the fruits of Joseph's interpretative ability include his rise to power appears as a blessing in the Bible; GK are right to emphasize the recoil from this shift from family to polity as a peculiarity of the "present age."

Following from this reasonable question, GK offer a most provocative thought: that Joseph offers a potential counterexample, a potential model, for escaping from the bad binary (GK's words) of forging one's identity without negating one's family identity. To me, GK hit the nail on the head when they characterize Joseph as having redefined his family relationship in terms of God's promises. Although they mention the example of Abraham in passing, it seems reasonable to say that Abraham, Rebecca and Jacob all redefine their families through faith, although they do so very differently in detail (*Der liebe Gott lebt im Detail*) during the course of their lives. Abram/Abraham's willingness to leave home (Gen. 12) and to offer up Isaac (Gen. 22) have been seen as the bookend trials of Abraham by rabbinic literature. In the first instance, Abram famously leaves birthplace, kin, and household. In the second, Abraham imperils both his legacy and his younger son. Rebecca deludes her husband Isaac in the matter of the paternal blessing, because only in that way can she insure that the oracle she received from God, "that the elder will serve the younger" (Gen 25:22-23), will come true. Jacob strives, bargains, and ultimately deceives his brother Esau, berates his children Simeon and Levi, and even contravenes his favorite Joseph (the cross-handed blessing of Ephraim over Menasseh in Genesis 48). In all these instances, direct or implicit appeal to God's higher authority actually lead these central characters to a reconfiguring of family, and at the risk of considerable familial tension.

The conclusion of GK's essay continues this line of thought, and it offers, it seems to this untutored reader, a spirited defense of Stanley Hauerwas's caveats and critique of "the idolatry of familial identity." I will take no normative position on this issue but will make three quick observations by way of concluding my own response. One, I agree with GK in their reading the biblical character of Joseph this way: his reconfiguring of family takes place within a context of answering to a higher authority. Two, without suggesting for a moment that American Jews are immune from the ills of nationalism, racism or sexism, the peculiar history of Jews as a minority makes a constructed view of family, however bourgeois, seem something like a necessary bulwark against the encroachments of a sometimes hostile majority, and with regard to culture as much as faith. Three, throughout my reading and re-reading of this response, I thought of another Joseph—Joseph Soloveitchik, the intellectual mainstay of American Orthodoxy in the 20th century. In his 1964 essay *The Lonely Man of Faith*, Soloveitchik began with the dramatic assertion that despite the presence family, friends, and community, he felt at times bereft of God and that no set of human relationships could compensate for this lack.⁹ Soloveitchik's acknowledgment is surely less useful than GK's call for "balancing affirmation of the claims of God and family on one's identity," but no less moving.

For GK's penetrating reading of my work, I close as I began, with gratitude.

⁸ Patricia Ahearne-Kroll, ed., "Joseph and Aseneth," in *Outside the Bible*, vol. III, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2013), 2525-2589.

⁹ Joseph Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 2006).