

Identity Politics and the Burial of Jacob (Genesis 50:1-14)

JOSHUA BERMAN

Bar-Ilan University

52900 Ramat-Gan, Israel

NO BURIAL NARRATIVE in the Hebrew Bible is as long and detailed as the account of the burial of Jacob in Gen 50:1-14. For Gordon J. Wenham, the passage reflects Jacob's stature as the father of the nation whose story constitutes more than half the book of Genesis.¹ Yet other biblical figures whose stories make up a longer portion of biblical narrative receive less attention in death than does Jacob. The burial of Moses and the public grief in its aftermath are recounted in a mere three verses (Deut 34:6-8). The death and burial of David, the Bible's most developed character, are mentioned in a mere note (1 Kgs 2:10). One prominent medieval rabbinic commentator, R. David Qimhi, suggests that the passage reflects the great esteem that the Egyptians feel for Jacob, as Joseph's father.² Yet if the import of the passage lies in its testimony to Egyptian esteem for Joseph, we can only be mystified by the relatively terse information conveyed upon Joseph's death. If a show of such grandeur was displayed for his father, surely the same must be done for Joseph himself. The text of Gen 50:26, however, says only that Joseph is embalmed; it says nothing about mourning rites held in his honor. Why would the text vicariously celebrate Joseph's esteem in the eyes of the Egyptians by recounting the death of Jacob rather than by depicting a grand finale celebrating the recognition given Joseph himself? Indeed, we note

My thanks to Simi Peters and to Adam Ferziger for commenting on earlier versions of the manuscript.

¹ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50* (WBC 2; Dallas: Word Books, 1994) 488.

² R. David Qimhi, *Commentary to the Book of Genesis*, 50:3. The commentary may be found in *Torat Chaim* (ed. M. L. Katzenelenbogen; 7 vols.; Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1987) 2. 282.

together with Penina Galpaz-Feller that it would seem that Scripture could have made do with merely reporting the transport of the body to its resting place, as is found with regard to Ahaziah (2 Kgs 9:28), Amaziah (2 Kgs 14:20), and Josiah (2 Kgs 23:30).³

In this article I would like to propose an alternative locus of meaning for the narrative of Jacob's burial. In various localized comments, one finds in the scholarship on this passage interpretations of cultural tension as an undercurrent in this display of pageantry for the deceased Jacob. Two examples will suffice for introductory purposes. Victor Hamilton describes the discrepancies between Jacob's request of Joseph in Gen 47:29-30 and Joseph's ostensibly verbatim repetition of that request before Pharaoh in 50:5 as a function of Joseph's reluctance to verbalize remarks that may have been taken as a slight to Pharaoh and to things Egyptian.⁴ The political scientist Aaron Wildavsky suggests that the military escort mentioned in 50:9 may be sent to ensure that Joseph and his family would entertain no thoughts of repatriation in Canaan and would return to Egypt immediately following the burial.⁵

Much work, however, remains to be done to develop fully the theme of cultural tension at play in Gen 50:1-14. Even before we engage the text of Genesis 50 in a close reading, we may note that the burial of Jacob is the most nervously anticipated burial in the Bible. It is not death that Jacob fears but interment in a fashion inconsistent with the ancestral tradition. Jacob's concerns that he could be interred in Egypt are first intimated as he descends to Egypt (Gen 46:1-4). These concerns are given oral expression in 47:29-31 before Joseph and a final time in 49:29-33 before all of the brothers just prior to his demise.

Many helpful comments are found in the studies of this passage concerning the tension that Joseph experiences as a Hebrew, on the one hand, and as a prominent Egyptian, on the other—a tension between what we might call his host culture and his heritage culture. Yet few commentators have taken into account the subtle interplay between the nine initiatives taken by Joseph and/or the brothers (vv. 1, 2, 4, 7, 8, 10, 12, 14) in this account and the six initiatives taken by Pharaoh and/or members of the court (vv. 2, 3, 6, 7, 9, 10). In this study I examine the interplay between the various players on the stage in this narrative from an integrated perspective that sees these initiatives as cross-cultural responses and counter-responses that evolve with each stage of the procession as Jacob is taken from expiration to interment.

³ Penina Galpaz-Feller, "Jacob's Death," *Bet Miqra* 48, no. 4 (2003) 335-44, esp. 337.

⁴ Victor Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 693.

⁵ Aaron Wildavsky, *Assimilation versus Separation: Joseph the Administrator and the Politics of Religion in Biblical Israel* (New Brunswick/London: Transaction Publishers, 1993) 123.

Finally and, perhaps, most significantly, no prior study has attempted to see the cultural tensions at play in Gen 50:1-14 within the larger tapestry of the Joseph narrative of Genesis 37-50. The narrated time of Joseph's tenure as viceroy spans some eighty years, with a concentration on the first twenty-six of those years, as recounted in 41:14-50:14. One may assume that, as viceroy, Joseph would have many occasions on which to speak with Pharaoh about a wide range of issues. The Book of Genesis records only three such encounters: Joseph's first appearance before the throne (41:14-46), his appeal to Pharaoh to relocate his siblings to Goshen (46:31-47:10), and his plea to bury Jacob in Canaan (50:4-6). It is my contention that all three narratives address the manner in which Joseph manages and negotiates his Hebrewness, and that the burial narrative of 50:1-14 marks the finale of the development of this theme.

In the course of my analysis of the figures of Jacob and Joseph, I will employ perspectives of identity politics. This perspective attends to the ways in which members of a community marginalized within a larger culture seek to assert or reclaim ways of understanding their distinctiveness that challenge dominant oppressive characterizations. Rejecting the negative scripts offered by a dominant culture about one's own inferiority, marginalized individuals transform their own sense of self and community.⁶ Such an approach, I contend, can shed light on the experiences of Joseph and Jacob as Hebrews in Egypt.

I. Joseph, Pharaoh, and the "Hebrew" Question

Joseph first encounters Pharaoh when he is plucked from the dungeon and brought before the court (Gen 41:14). Robert Alter is surely correct that the note that Joseph shaves and changes his clothes is superfluous if we are merely to understand that Joseph decides to "tidy up" for the occasion. Rather, Joseph shaves his head or beard in order to conform to Egyptian norms of coiffure and presentation.⁷ We may support Alter's claim by observing that although our norms of etiquette would dictate that Joseph have a "shower and a shave," to read this understanding back into the text of Genesis is anachronistic. Nowhere in the Hebrew Bible do we find the root גלח associated with cleanliness or appropriateness. Male Semites are routinely displayed as bearded in graphic representations

⁶ For an overview of identity politics within contemporary philosophy, see Cressida Heyes, "Identity Politics," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2002 Edition)*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2002/entries/identity-politics/> (accessed December 30, 2004).

⁷ Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York/London: W. W. Norton, 1996) 236. Alter's comment was already anticipated by the fifteenth-century Italian rabbinic scholar R. Obadiah of Bertinoro, in his supercommentary on Rashi's commentary on the Torah, *Amar Neke* (republished, Jerusalem, 1991) Gen 41:14, p. 58.

of the ancient Near East, whereas Egyptians are depicted as clean shaven.⁸ One can well imagine how disconcerted Joseph must feel at the sudden and radical change to his external presentation of self, as the locks of his dark Semitic hair fall to the ground, as he runs his fingers over the face of his skin for the first time since childhood, as the guards “rush” him for his appearance before the court.

Now, one could imagine an alternative scenario. Joseph could have appeared before Pharaoh as is—that is, as a Semite, as a Hebrew, yet prepared to shave if asked. Yet this is not Joseph’s strategy. Not here—and, I suggest, not at the subsequent junctures of bicultural conflict that he faces in his encounters with Pharaoh across the entire narrative. Joseph takes preemptive action, anticipating the modes of behavior most likely to find favor with his new patron rather than waiting to be asked to conform later.

Details later in the dream-interpretation narrative of chap. 41 further address the dynamics of Joseph’s Hebrewness. Scholars have pointed to evidence from Egyptian wall paintings and reliefs that depict installation ceremonies that likewise feature investiture ceremonies including the laying on of a gold necklace (41:42), acclaim before the chariot (41:43), and the bestowal of a royal name.⁹ Genesis 41:45, however, also adds the note that “[Pharaoh] gave him for a wife Asenath, daughter of Poti-phera, priest of On,” ostensibly to further cement Joseph’s participation in and identity with Egyptian society. It is striking to note Joseph’s utter passivity throughout vv. 37-45, especially after his proactive stance in preparing for the meeting and his suggestive solution for dealing with the impending famine (vv. 33-36). The silence is implicit acquiescence to follow Pharaoh’s lead.

Coming away from the encounter, Joseph could only conclude that the strategy of working to please his patron had worked. Although the chief cupbearer had announced that the lad he had in mind was a Hebrew (40:12), an identity that had cost him earlier at the hands of Potiphar’s wife (39:14-17), he seems to execute the responsibilities of his office (41:46-57; 47:13-26) with no reference to his origins or heritage.¹⁰ Indeed, Joseph is never again referred to as a Hebrew following his ascension to the court.

The next episode in which Joseph engages the court is at the moment when his family members—seventy “abominable” Hebrews (46:34; cf. 43:32)—arrive on the scene. Joseph’s management of his dual commitments to father and to

⁸ See C. H. Gordon, *The Ancient Near East* (3rd ed.; New York: Norton, 1965) 138.

⁹ For sources, see Nahum Sarna, *Genesis = Be-reshit: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989) 286-87; Wenham, *Genesis*, 395-96.

¹⁰ Even as Joseph ascribes his interpretation of Pharaoh’s dream to God (Gen 41:16, 25, 28, 32), he never refers to God as “God of the Hebrews” (cf. Exod 5:3), nor as “the God of my fathers” (cf. Gen 31:42). The ethnic-neutral value of the term “God” (אלהים) is evidenced by the fact that even Pharaoh is comfortable using it (41:38-39).

Pharaoh are at the center of the scene of the arrival, as recounted in 46:31–47:12. Perhaps the most striking aspect of Joseph's stewardship of these meetings is his choice to skip over Jacob and first to introduce the brothers. This is but the first indication that Joseph is quite tense about the meeting. How will Pharaoh receive these "abominable" people? Joseph choreographs each step to ensure that all will proceed smoothly. Prior to the brothers' meeting with Pharaoh, Joseph makes his own visit to the throne. Moreover, Joseph tells the brothers what will transpire in that meeting, so that they will encounter Pharaoh already knowledgeable of what he knows about them (46:31–32). He then provides them with the script of what they are to say to Pharaoh in the meeting (46:34). Nothing is left to chance.

Two main strands of interpretation dominate the literature concerning the goal of Joseph's maneuvering, opinions that, to my thinking, are complementary. One trend of interpretation sees Joseph's maneuvering as a subterfuge designed to ensure that the clan of Jacob is given a segregated enclave of its own and thus to sustain its autonomous cultural identity.¹¹ Both Joseph and the brothers mention the fact that they are shepherds—an abomination in Egypt—and that they are currently residing in the land of Goshen, in the hope that Pharaoh will conclude that it is just as well that they stay there, segregated from the center of Egyptian society. Note that within this interpretation the celebration of Hebrew difference is, on the one hand, distinct and, on the other, consciously muted. The internal word within the family is that it is their own desire to remain distinct, lest they become assimilated. They choose to segregate as an exercise in self-interest. Yet this self-perception of ethnic pride is a muted one, because it is hardly the narrative presented before Pharaoh. To celebrate difference and openly demand respect for it is apparently not an option, politically speaking. The appeal to Pharaoh must be made along the lines of what Pharaoh will perceive as his own cultural interest.

A second line of interpretation emphasizes that Joseph seeks to assure Pharaoh that the clan would not be a burden on the crown and that they are essentially self-sufficient.¹² According to this reading, both Joseph and the brothers emphasize the herds and flocks that they have brought with them (46:32–34). The script that Joseph hands them (v. 34) makes mention of their possessions but bears no request for a grant of land so that they would not appear as a burden on Egypt. Joseph hopes that Pharaoh will make the grant himself.

¹¹ Abarbanel, *The Commentary to the Pentateuch of Don Isaac Abarbanel* (in Hebrew; Jerusalem: Arbel Brothers, 1984) 422; Wenham, *Genesis*, 445; Ronald S. Wallace, *The Story of Joseph and the Family of Jacob* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) 99–100.

¹² Nachmanides 46:32. The text of Nachmanides' commentary on the Pentateuch may be found in any edition of the *Miqra'ot Gedolot*, the medieval rabbinic parallel to the *Glossa Ordinaria*. A relatively modern edition is that of *Torat Chaim* (ed. M. L. Katzenelenbogen; 7 vols.; Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1987). See also Abarbanel, *Commentary*, 422; Eric I. Lowenthal, *The Joseph Narrative in Genesis* (New York: Ktav, 1973) 123.

The most telling symptom of Joseph's tension here is seen through a comparison of what he tells the brothers he will say to Pharaoh to explain their presence (46:31) and what he actually tells Pharaoh (47:1).

<i>Gen 46:31—To the brothers</i>	<i>Gen 47:1—To Pharaoh</i>
My brothers	My father
and my father's household	and my brothers,
	their flocks, their herds, and all that is theirs,
who were in the land of Canaan	
have come	have come from the land of Canaan
to me	
	and are now in the region of Goshen

To the brothers, Joseph says that he will tell Pharaoh that they—including all of Jacob's household—have come to *him*. Joseph implies that he can present their arrival as that of intimate family members, who, of course, will be warmly received by the court. His words serve to soothe their sense of alienation in a new and foreign land. To Pharaoh, however, Joseph never mentions that they have come "to him," nor does he mention "Jacob's household." Joseph does not wish to give the impression that he is imposing on the kingdom with the request of a personal favor that his entire extended clan be allowed to freeload on Egyptian soil. He therefore adds that not only are "they"—the family members—coming, but also "their flocks, their herds, and all that is theirs."¹³ Joseph's father and brothers are significant not in terms of their relation to Joseph but in terms of the wealth they bring Pharaoh.

This comparison may highlight Joseph's shrewdness in knowing just what to say to each party. But it also tells us that Joseph, in his attempt to remain loyal to his dual commitments, in fact, remains duplicitous to each. He is unable to be fully open and truthful to either side. To his brothers he lies by presenting them with a script of his words to Pharaoh that is unfaithful to what he will ultimately submit before the throne. And to Pharaoh he is unfaithful as well, as he must create a "false self," giving the impression that his sole concern is for the throne and not for the love and concern for his family members. Alternatively, we could explain that what Joseph tells his brothers in 46:31 is, in fact, what he intends at

¹³ Abarbanel, *Commentary*, 422.

that moment to tell Pharaoh. Something happens on the way to the throne chamber, however, and Joseph gets cold feet. His "revised text" in 47:1 reflects his inability to be truthful to the throne as well as a lack of the courage and fraternal loyalty that are necessary to convey the impression that the brothers had been given in 46:31. Either way, the tension implicit in the comparison between the two passages is the same.

What is most significant about the arrival scene, however, is Pharaoh's overwhelmingly enthusiastic response, to the point that one is tempted to conclude that Joseph had badly misjudged the degree of reticence that would be exhibited by the court. The brothers, in fact, deviate from the script and plead to be allowed to settle in the land of Goshen (47:3)¹⁴—this, against Joseph's strategy that they state only that they are shepherds, with no mention whatever of the land of Goshen (46:34). Pharaoh, however, is disconcerted neither by their entreaty for land nor by their "abominable" profession. Not a word of disparagement is said about their entreaty for a grant of land, and the grant of the land could not have been offered in a more magnanimous spirit: "the land of Egypt is open before you; settle your father and brothers in the best part of the land; let them stay in the region of Goshen" (47:6). Nor are any misgivings expressed with regard to their profession. In fact, just the opposite sentiment emerges: "And if you know any capable men among them, put them in charge of my livestock" (47:6).¹⁵ Benno Jacob has suggested that Pharaoh's query, "And Pharaoh said to *his brothers*, 'What is your occupation?'" (47:3) is asked uncritically and that the syntax of the verse leaves room for one to understand that Pharaoh relates to them as *brothers*—his own "brothers."¹⁶

Earlier I noted the discrepancy between what Joseph tells his brothers he would tell Pharaoh (46:31) and what he actually tells Pharaoh (47:1) as an index of the tension that Joseph experiences as he manages his dual commitments. The dynamic comes full circle when we add to that comparison Pharaoh's response to Joseph in 47:5 (see chart on next page).

Joseph labors to conceal the fact that for him this is a family reunion, and instead plays up the flocks and herds that will now contribute to the Egyptian economy. Lo and behold, it is Pharaoh himself who mouths the words to Joseph that Joseph himself was afraid to say openly before the king. They have come, he says "to *you*."¹⁷ Moreover, Pharaoh makes the grant of the land without explicit

¹⁴ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 37–50: A Commentary* (trans. John J. Scullion; Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986) 169.

¹⁵ Hamilton, *Genesis*, 607–8.

¹⁶ Benno Jacob, *Das Erste Buch der Tora, Genesis, übersetzt und erklärt* (Berlin: Schocken, 1934) 843.

¹⁷ See, in much briefer fashion, Lowenthal, *Joseph Narrative*, 123.

<i>Gen 46:31 To the brothers</i>	<i>Gen 47:1 To Pharaoh</i>	<i>Gen 47:5 Pharaoh to Joseph</i>
My brothers	My father	Your father
and my father's household	and my brothers,	and your brothers
	their flocks, their herds, and all that is theirs	.
who were in the land of Canaan		
have come	have come from the land of Canaan	have come
to me		to you
	and are now in the region of Goshen	

reference to the flocks and the herds. In effect, what has transpired here borders on the absurd: what Joseph had been reluctant to verbalize to Pharaoh, Pharaoh himself declares before Joseph with great enthusiasm!

To summarize, we see once again a familiar pattern of behavior in the dynamics between Joseph and Pharaoh concerning Hebrew identity. Earlier we saw that as he approaches the throne for the first time, Joseph takes preemptive actions to appease Pharaoh and to appear as Egyptian as possible. Pharaoh, in turn, receives Joseph enthusiastically with no apparent concern for his Hebrew origins. The anticipatory measures of care to mollify Pharaoh taken by Joseph in the arrival narrative of chaps. 46–47 are of an even more pronounced nature. Joseph prepares to make a request of the throne and to broach the potentially sensitive issue of a pronounced Hebrew presence in Egypt. Pharaoh extends an enthusiastic welcome, expressing concern neither for the family's cultural origins as Hebrews nor for their drain on Egyptian resources. The contrast between Joseph's timidity and Pharaoh's gregariousness casts the former's disposition concerning Hebrewness and the court to stand out in ever bolder relief. The disparity between Joseph's anticipation of antipathy toward the new immigrants and the actual accord offered them, is well explained by the social-scientific literature of the experience of immigration. Even as they harbor immigrant cultures different from their own, dominant or majority cultures do not suffer from problems of identity.¹⁸ Their power allows them to define themselves as the norm. As long as

¹⁸ Nigel Grant, "Some Problems of Identity and Education: A Comparative Examination of Multicultural Education," *Comparative Education* 33, no. 1 (1997) 9–28, here 22.

the minority is of negligible size, these cultures need not feel threatened by the presence of the other. By contrast, the dependence of the immigrant group on the host culture for acceptance perforce engenders angst concerning their perception in the eyes of the host culture.

I conclude the discussion of this episode in the Joseph–Pharaoh relationship with an observation that serves to underscore the trends I have delineated. If we look back in the Joseph narrative prior to the arrival scene of chaps. 46–47, we see that Pharaoh’s supportive and enthusiastic welcome should have been easily anticipated. Consider the court’s response to the discovery that Joseph’s brothers had arrived in Egypt, in the denouement scene of Gen 45:16–20. Without any prompting from Joseph, with no concern for their Hebrew origins, with no mention of the sheep they will provide to Egypt, Pharaoh urges the brothers to come—not to Joseph, but rather, “take your father and your households and come *to me*” (וּבְאוּ אֵלַי; 45:18). One is left amazed by the concern and machinations employed by Joseph when the brothers actually do arrive—at the zenith of his power, no less—two years into the famine. Such, however, is the manner of Joseph before the throne. Pharaoh’s patronage must never be taken for granted.

II. The Death and Burial of Jacob

This takes us now to the third dialogue in the Joseph narrative between Joseph and Pharaoh, Joseph’s request to bury Jacob in Canaan. I would like, first, to offer some remarks about Jacob’s lengthy final words in Gen 49:29–32. They represent his second appeal to be buried in Canaan. Earlier, in his burial request of Joseph, he had referred to the Cave of Machpelah simply as “their burial-place.” No further elaboration was necessary, as Joseph knew of the place of which his father spoke. Yet, with the entire family gathered around his deathbed in chap. 49, Jacob uses no fewer than fifty-two words to describe the cave. Certainly the geographic designations he cites—for example, “the cave which is in the field of Machpelah, facing Mamre, in the land of Canaan” (49:30)—as well as the appellations “*his wife Sarah*” and “*his wife Rebekah*” (49:31) are superfluous, as these women are well known both to the protagonists in the story and to the reader. Yet, beyond the lengthy description of the cave given here, it is also important to note that Jacob’s casting of the cave reveals some new points about it, points that the biblical author saw best to leave for this moment. It is only through Jacob’s last testament here that we as readers learn that the matriarchs Rebekah and Leah were buried there. Previously the text had explicitly told of the burial of Sarah and Abraham there (Gen 23:19; 25:9) and perhaps had suggested that Isaac had been buried there as well (Gen 35:27–29), though the Cave of Machpelah is not explicitly mentioned in that passage. Another unusual feature of Jacob’s last testament is the way in which he refers to the burial of Isaac: “it was there that they buried Abraham and his wife Sarah, there *they* buried Isaac and his

wife Rebecca, there I buried Leah" (49:31). Indeed, a referent for the pronominal "they" may be identified with regard to the burial of Abraham and of Sarah respectively, and it is appropriate for Jacob, as surviving husband, to speak of the burial of Leah as having been his responsibility. Yet, inasmuch as the biblical text states that Jacob and Esau had buried Isaac (35:29), it seems anomalous for Jacob to refer to "them" in a kind of royal third person, "there *they* buried Isaac."

I would like to illuminate Jacob's soliloquy here by reference to a 1997 study of the migration legends told by Trinidadian Muslims of Indian origins about their arrival in the Western Hemisphere as slaves in the sugar fields. Muslim imams invoke and reinterpret tales about the capture of the first slaves in the subcontinent, their transfer by boat across the seas, and their resettlement on the islands of the Caribbean. The reinterpretation of the stories reflects the attempts of the imams to contend with global transformation and local, contemporary tensions. The author of the study observes that "migration stories are a way of displacing the locus of identity out of the present into a realm that can stand outside the everyday of conflict and tension, thereby providing a foundation for identities able to transcend the implicitly painful present. . . . [T]hrough their own migration stories, Indo-Trinidadian/Caribbean Muslim peoples engage in a form of resistance . . . a rejection of the established order."¹⁹

The same is true for Jacob's "retelling" of the ancestral narrative of burial. Certain details that were dispensable for the narrator (e.g., the interment of Rebekah and Leah) loom large for Jacob as he looks to take his place within the ancestral sepulcher. It was, in his eyes, a generic "they"—the people, the descendants, who had buried Isaac, not Jacob's act particularly. As Jacob retells all of the spousal relations and all of the geographic details of the cave, he too engages in an act of resistance; he too stubbornly rejects the established order of his imposed exile, Egypt. Jacob's insistence on being buried in the Cave of Machpelah is born of two motivations: (1) to take his place as a bona fide patriarch; (2) to avoid involvement in the cult of Osiris. It is a celebration of his difference as a Hebrew, a difference that he demands be respected. The stage is set for the final act of the drama in which Joseph encounters Pharaoh across the cultural divide between two cultures, host and heritage. Moments later the still warm body of the departed, resistant patriarch will be caressed by the signet ring of the Pharaoh, the flowing fine linens of office, kissed by the clean-shaven face of the viceroy of Egypt (Gen 50:1).

It is at the nexus between the expression of Joseph's grief in 50:1 and the actions that ensue in the next eleven verses that one may sense what I consider a

¹⁹ Aisha Khan, "Migration Narratives and Moral Imperatives: Local and Global in the Muslim Caribbean," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 17, no. 1 (1997) 127-44, esp. 130-31.

rupture in the text. To detect this “rupture,” though, requires familiarity with a particular convention of biblical rhetoric. The phrase “and he/they did as told/commanded” (וַיַּעַשׂ/וּ . . . כַּאֲשֶׁר אָמַר/צִוָּה) appears twenty-four times in the Bible in the context of the fulfillment of a specific command. In thirteen of these instances, the phrase appears with the addition of a reiterative statement of the command, as we find in the Joseph narrative in Gen 43:16-17:

When Joseph saw Benjamin with them, he said to the house steward, “*Take the men into the house; slaughter and prepare an animal, for the men will dine with me at noon.*” The man did as Joseph said (וַיַּעַשׂ הָאִישׁ כַּאֲשֶׁר אָמַר יוֹסֵף), *and he brought the men into Joseph’s house.*²⁰

Elsewhere the formula “and he/they did as told/commanded” appears without the reiterative statement, but where the connotation of fulfillment is nonetheless understood, as in Num 17:25-26:

The LORD said to Moses, “Put Aaron’s staff back before the Pact, as a lesson to rebels, so that their mutterings against me may cease, lest they die.” This Moses did; just as the LORD had commanded him, so he did (וַיַּעַשׂ מֹשֶׁה כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' אֹתוֹ כֵּן) (עָשָׂה).²¹

What all of these statements have in common, however, is that the formulaic phrase depicting execution of a command “and he/they did as told/commanded” always immediately follows the command itself, as in the two instances cited above: Joseph commands, the steward promptly obeys. God commands Moses, and Moses promptly obeys. The universal location of the statement “and he did as commanded” immediately following the command implies a sense of alacrity and fealty on the part of the executing party, especially when the formula is strengthened with the reiterative statement of the command, as in the case cited above from Gen 43:16-17. In the corpus of the Hebrew Bible there is but a single exception to this convention that dictates that statements of command and statements of fulfillment are to be juxtaposed, and it is here in the narrative of Jacob’s death and burial (49:29–50:1). Jacob instructs his sons to bury him in Canaan (49:29). Yet it is only after the passage of forty days of embalment, another thirty days of mourning, a journey across the desert, another seven days of mourning, and—from a rhetorical perspective—*eleven* verses later, that we finally encounter the fulfillment formula that matches the command (50:12-13):

²⁰ Cf. Exod 7:10, 20; 17:10; Lev 8:4; Num 5:4; 8:3; 20:27; 27:22; Josh 4:8; 11:9; 1 Kgs 21:11.

²¹ Cf. Exod 12:28, 50; Lev 16:34; Num 23:30; 31:31; Judg 6:27; 2 Sam 5:25; Job 42:9; 1 Chr 14:16. It is interesting to note that a corollary to this formula, וַיַּעַשׂ/וּ כְדִבְרִי, appears in an additional eight occurrences, seven of which lack the reiterative statement of the command (Gen 44:2; Exod 8:9, 27; 32:28; Lev 10:7; 1 Kgs 17:5; Esth 1:21; Neh 5:13). Only in 1 Kgs 17:5 is there a reiteration of the command within the fulfillment formula.

And his sons did for him as he had instructed them. His sons carried him to the land of Canaan, and buried him in the Cave of Machpelah, the field near Mamre which Abraham had bought for a burial site from Ephron the Hittite.

I call this variation from convention a rupture in the text because it calls into question all that transpires in the middle. It induces us to ask, is all of this, in fact, a fulfillment of what Jacob had asked, a partial fulfillment, or perhaps not a fulfillment at all? It is my contention, as we embark on a reading of Gen 50:2-14, that this question lurks beneath every move taken in this narrative, and emerges not only as a question for the reader but as a question with which Joseph himself struggles as he strains to find the middle path of fulfilling the obligations of two cultures, host and heritage, and of his commitment to two commanding person-ages in his life, father and Pharaoh. The biblical text concentrates on Joseph alone in 50:1 because it is in him and through him that the dynamics of identity politics will be played out.

As we read Joseph's steps and responses here, I would like to take stock of Joseph's position, both within the palace and within the family. Throughout Genesis 41-47 Joseph's stature as potentate is clear. Yet the powers that he commands are all seen to be a function of his administration of Egypt during the crisis of the famine. At this juncture in the story, twelve years have passed since the end of the famine. What is Joseph's stature at this time? It may be argued, and justifiably I think, that the text gives no indication of a diminishing of powers or of office. He is still, in title, the viceroy. Yet, as he prepares to issue the request to take his father, and perhaps his entire clan, out of Egypt, Joseph must ask himself, how much political capital do I have? What are the limits of what I may request? We saw earlier that Joseph was wary of the royal response as he prepared to appeal for his family's resettlement in the land of Goshen. That, recall, was at a time in his career when he was at the pinnacle of his power—two years into the famine, with all of Egypt dependent on him. It stands to reason, therefore, that now, twelve years after the resumption of normal agricultural production, Joseph will again be wary of the throne's response as he contemplates leaving Egypt and burying his father in a manner very different from the Egyptian norm.

My exposition of the burial narrative of 50:1-13 consists of a close reading that begins with Joseph's command to have Jacob embalmed (50:2-3a). The reading of this verse benefits from what Edward L. Greenstein, drawing on Roland Barthes and Camera Lucida Barthes's notions of narrative ambiguity and the admissibility of friction between two intelligibilities, has termed an "equivocal" reading.²² Within this reading strategy the multiplicity of meanings in the text is

²² Edward L. Greenstein, "An Equivocal Reading of the Sale of Joseph," in *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives* (ed. Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis and James Ackerman; 2 vols.; Bible in Literature Courses; Nashville: Abingdon, 1982) 2. 114-25, esp. 122-23.

celebrated, rather than resisted by searching for a univalent reading of the text. In the present interpretation, the narrative ambiguity that I sense rests in the soul of the protagonist himself. The physical actions taken in the plot are clear enough. The ambiguity stems from the variety of shifting motivations behind it.

Joseph's first step upon rising from his father's deathbed is also his most enigmatic. What is the nature of this procedure, and what motivated the command? Contrasting explanations have been offered. For Nahum Sarna, the act is without any religious significance and is purely a practical necessity, for Jacob is to be buried far from his place of death.²³ Hamilton, by contrast, points out that embalming was, above all, an inherently religious act in Egypt, and the implication is that Joseph wishes to honor his father in the eyes of the locals.²⁴ Read back into the identity politics of Joseph's psyche, what may emerge is not two alternatives but complementary positions. The command to embalm the patriarch would signal different things to different audiences, perhaps even different messages to Joseph himself. To Pharaoh it would signal compliance with Egyptian burial protocol (even as, in his heart, Joseph already prepares to violate that protocol with the request to bury Jacob in Canaan). Such a signal would earn Joseph political capital and would make it easier for him to pose his request later on. Subjecting Jacob to such a foreign practice could signify to the brothers, and perhaps to Joseph's own conscience, compliance with Jacob's own requests—after all, the body could hardly be left to putrefy over the duration of the journey. Moreover, Joseph could reason to his "Hebrew" constituency—whether that meant his brothers or a wrestling within his own soul—that all this was for the honor of Jacob, that it would be an indignity to Jacob's memory to do anything less. Diplomatically, therefore, the first move that Joseph makes, ordering the embalming of his father, would seem to be a move that allows Joseph to achieve the equilibrium he seeks between two competing sets of cultural obligations.²⁵

The statement in v. 3a, "it required forty days, for such is the full period of embalming," is equally enigmatic. Why has the biblical author included this note? The phrase *כִּי כֵן יְמֵי הַחַנְטִים* may be understood in two ways, demonstrating Joseph's multiple handling of the issue. The phrase is translated in the *NJPS* version "for such is the full period of embalming," and it is rendered similarly in the *NRSV*, *REB*, and *NAB* translations. The note may be seen as neutral in terms of the question of Joseph's motivation, simply reflecting the author's desire for verisimilitude. Yet a different connotation may be inferred when the expression is compared with a close parallel, Esth 2:12: "The turn came for each girl to

²³ Sarna, *Genesis*, 347.

²⁴ Hamilton, *Genesis*, 692.

²⁵ The tensions in the verse were already evident to the rabbis of the midrash. See *Gen. Rab.* 100.4.

go in to King Ahasuerus, after twelve months under the regulations for the women, *since this was the regular period of their cosmetic treatment* (כִּי כֵן יִמְלֹאוּ) (מִי מְרִיקֶיהֶן), six months with oil of myrrh and six months with perfumes and cosmetics for women” (NRSV). This verse from Esther is the only other biblical occurrence of the phrase כִּי כֵן יִמְלֹאוּ יָמֵי. Its connotation in Esther, as rendered by the NRSV, suggests compliance with a norm, an accepted custom. Other such explanatory phrases with כִּי כֵן are found in Judg 14:10, “and Samson made a feast there, as young men used to do” (כִּי כֵן יַעֲשׂוּ הַבָּחֳרִים); and in 2 Sam 13:18, “She was wearing an ornamented tunic, for maiden princesses were customarily dressed in such garments” (כִּי כֵן תַּלְבָּשׁ בְּנוֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ הַבְּתוּלוֹת מַעֲלִילִים) (cf. כִּי כֵן also in 2 Chr 8:14), both of which suggest conformance with a social norm. Thus, the note of the duration of the process of embalming with the expression כִּי כֵן suggests that the embalmmment was performed *according to custom*. Joseph gives the body over to the physicians and then steps out of the picture. The expression “it required forty days, for such is the full period of embalming” is said as Jacob’s body rests on their mortuary table. One may interpret that Joseph surrenders the body to the physicians, who then do as is the prevailing custom—perhaps what we could term using today’s vernacular, “the (standard!) forty-day treatment.” Does Joseph do this with the sole purpose of honoring his father? Or does he give over the body to the physicians for them to—naturally—do as would be done for any prominent Egyptian, and all this in order to demonstrate, to one and all, just how Egyptian this grieving process is going to be? The issue, I submit, may have been as unclear to Joseph as actor as it is to us as readers.

I noted earlier that throughout the burial narrative, Jacob is consistently referred to as “his father” or “your father,” that is, always in relation to Joseph. The lone exception is in 50:2: “and the physicians embalmed *Israel*.” I understand the reference to “Israel” here, and only in this verse, as a contrast to the “Israel” who asked—nay, pleaded—with Joseph not to be buried in Egypt, and who made Joseph take a vow to this effect (47:29-31). On his deathbed, the patriarch is twice referred to as Israel (47:29, 31). Genesis 50:2 may be read, then, as bearing tragic implication. Here is “Israel,” who longed to merit the same ancestral burial as his forebears, now laid out upon the mortuary table of the Egyptian physicians with his innards subjected to Egyptian ritual day after day for forty days, “for such was the custom.”

With Hamilton, we may assume that the Egyptians mourn Jacob (50:3b-4a) presumably out of tribute to Joseph.²⁶ Yet what are the implications of this lavish outpouring of grief from Joseph’s perspective? The various possible answers to this question should not be pitted against one another but should be read together

²⁶ Hamilton, *Genesis*, 692.

and in tension. It is far from clear that Joseph requested this treatment for his father, and it seems that the public grieving is an Egyptian initiative, perhaps even a spontaneous one. Joseph may have been disturbed. Wishing to fulfill his father's will, Joseph may have preferred to embark quickly in order to bury his father in a timely fashion.²⁷ The outpouring of public grief, which Joseph can hardly stop, represents for him a hijacking, an appropriation of the cultural tone of the grieving process. The extended Egyptian grieving, however, could engender an entirely different set of emotions. As a grieving son, Joseph may be pleased that his father is receiving such a tribute. If, perhaps, it is all too "Egyptian," he may reason, well, that's what the Egyptians know how to do, and therefore they should not be faulted.

We may, alternatively, recognize a third way to analyze Joseph's feelings over this public grieving. Notice the introduction to Joseph's appeal to the court: "*And when the wailing period was over, Joseph spoke to Pharaoh's court. . . .*" The biblical text could just as easily have omitted the phrase and run vv. 3 and 4 together as follows: "The Egyptians bewailed him seventy days. And Joseph spoke to Pharaoh's court. . . ." The introductory phrase indicating the timing, "when the wailing period was over," is again a reference to the adherence to norm and custom. Joseph does not make his appeal to transport Jacob for interment until Egyptian mourning norms have been fully observed. By demonstrating to the Egyptians that he is engaging in the grieving process for his father in a fully Egyptian manner, Joseph is hoping to build up capital for the moment when he will call for a break from those norms, in compliance with his father's wish. It is perhaps telling that Joseph does not request permission to bury his father in Canaan at the moment of the patriarch's death, but only after there has been scrupulous observance of the accepted norms—mortuary and mourning alike.

Many commentators have noted that Joseph appeals to Pharaoh only through intermediaries (50:4b). Meir Sternberg has suggested, correctly in my opinion, that Joseph feels the weight of his impending request and thus does not have the temerity to appeal to Pharaoh directly.²⁸ Yet even more significant than the recourse to emissaries is the discourse through which Joseph turns to them. He—emphatically—does not merely dispatch them; rather, he *implores* them: "If, please, I have found favor in your eyes, speak, please, before Pharaoh" (דברו נא באזני פרעה לאמר אם נא מצאתי חן בעיניכם).²⁹ This is because, as members

²⁷ The law in Deut 21:23 states that a criminal put to death should be buried on that same day, implying that there is an imperative to bury the dead as soon as possible.

²⁸ Meir Sternberg, *Hebrews between Cultures: Group Portraits and National Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998) 290, contra Hamilton, *Genesis*, 693; and Westermann, *Genesis*, 199.

²⁹ Elsewhere, the same language is used as a formula of entreaty (Gen 18:3; 33:10; Judg 6:17).

of Pharaoh's court, they will serve a function beyond that of mere couriers. Through their willingness to speak on Joseph's behalf they will effectively serve as his tacit advocates as well. This recourse to imploring emissaries may reflect musings that Joseph entertains about his own power to challenge Egyptian norms twelve years after the famine's end. We again recall that even at the pinnacle of his power and with Pharaoh's permission for the family to come, Joseph resorted to a host of machinations in chaps. 46–47, to neutralize the "Hebrew question" implicit in their arrival.

Both Hamilton and Claus Westermann have duly noted the differences between Jacob's request of Joseph to be buried in Canaan (47:29–31) and Joseph's ostensible citation of that request before Pharaoh in v. 5.³⁰ Joseph omits Jacob's plea "do not bury me in Egypt . . . carry me out of Egypt," because he does not want it to appear that Jacob was unfavorably disposed to the land of Egypt or ungrateful for the patronage offered him. Moreover, whereas Jacob had stated, "bury me in my fathers' burial place," Joseph rephrases the request. Jacob, according to Joseph, had asked, "in the grave which I hewed for myself in the land of Canaan, there you shall inter me." Joseph, as it were, speaks in Pharaoh's terms; Jacob wishes to be buried in the tomb that he had prepared for himself while yet alive, just as the Egyptians do. Moreover, Joseph leaves out the reference to an ancestral heritage.

We may hear in the dissonance of discourse echoes of a similar phenomenon that we saw earlier in chaps. 46–47. There Joseph offered his family one script of what he would say to Pharaoh, only to recite another one upon arriving at the throne. The dissonance, in effect, indicates that Joseph occupied a middle state between the two parties and could not fully be true to either. To his family he either lied or could not muster the gumption to tell Pharaoh what he had told them he would say. And to Pharaoh he was untruthful by presenting their presence on Egyptian soil with reference only to the economic gain for Pharaoh and no mention of the familial dimension of their reunification. A similar dynamic, in which Joseph is true to no one, is at work here in v. 5. His plea is diplomatically astute, but it underscores the degree to which Joseph cannot be himself. He cannot say before Pharaoh what he will tell his own kin upon his deathbed: "God will surely take notice of you and bring you up from this land to the land that he promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob" (50:24). In making the necessary changes before Pharaoh, Joseph subverts his father's memory and Jacob's fifty-two-word resistant "Ode to the Cave" (49:29–32). In effect, Joseph violates his own sense of self for pragmatic reasons. Again a "false-self" is presented.

To his plea to bury Jacob in Canaan, Joseph adds one final and critical word at the end of his communiqué to the king: "— and I shall return." The phrase is

• ³⁰ Hamilton, *Genesis*, 693; Westermann, *Genesis*, 200.

universally understood as an indication that Joseph fears that Pharaoh will suspect that Joseph and his family will use the burial as a ruse or excuse to return to the land of Canaan. Hamilton, however, has added a comment that is worthy of further elaboration: "Joseph is party to two promises—a promise to his father to bury him in Canaan, and a promise to his superior not to use this family matter as a means of permanently leaving Egypt."³¹ Hamilton sees the pairing of promises as an indication of Joseph's trustworthiness. Just as Jacob could trust Joseph to fulfill his final wish, so too Pharaoh demonstrates his implicit trust in Joseph, by accepting his request verbatim, "Go up and bury your father, as he made you promise on oath," and yet without stating, "and then return," which would have matched Joseph's promise, "and then I shall return."

I suggest that additional meaning may be adduced from the paired promises, not on account of the text's desire to convey a sense of Joseph's trustworthiness but as a symptom of Joseph's political tightrope. In his struggle to demonstrate equilibrium between loyalty to father and to Pharaoh, he matches promises, as it were, tit for tat. What he did for his father, he will now do for Pharaoh. Joseph underscores that he must do his father's bidding because he has made a commitment to do so. He counterbalances that for Pharaoh's sake by making a similar verbal commitment to him—albeit, we must admit, not through the agency of an oath. Pharaoh's failure to make mention of this commitment may be reinterpreted in light of the dynamic between the two, as we saw in chap. 47. In speaking to Pharaoh, Joseph had deliberately omitted the note that Jacob and family had come "to him [i.e., Joseph]" as family. Joseph had instructed his brothers to inform Pharaoh of their profession, but not to ask explicitly for the land of Goshen, lest they appear to be freeloaders. Yet, as we saw, Pharaoh was far more magnanimous than Joseph had imagined he would be. Pharaoh himself said, "your father and your brothers have come *to you*" (47:5). And Pharaoh generously offered them the land of Goshen, in spite of their "indiscretion"—from Joseph's perspective—in explicitly requesting to settle in the land of Goshen (47:4). Joseph, it would seem, miscalculated there, and he has miscalculated here again. Pharaoh's endorsement of Joseph's request to the point that he does not feel compelled to invoke a repetition of Joseph's promise to return may indicate Pharaoh's utter trust in Joseph. He trusts Joseph not on account of the promise he made, but on account of how loyal a servant he has been, these twenty-six years.

As the entourage embarks for Canaan, Joseph is set apart from the rest of the group (50:7-8a). It may be simply that the distinction is a function of narrative technique. The text highlights Joseph as the primary mourner and gives the impression that he leads the procession. I find helpful here a gloss offered by the

³¹ Hamilton, *Genesis*, 693.

sixteenth-century Italian rabbinic exegete R. Obadiah Seforno, in his commentary on 50:7. Regarding the phrase “and with him went up” (וַיַּעֲלוּ אִתּוֹ), he writes, “not at [Joseph’s] behest.”³² According to Seforno’s reading, Joseph intends to do precisely what he had said to Pharaoh, to “go up and bury my father”—perhaps even by himself, or with a small retinue of family members. Adopting Seforno’s reading, we may see the action in the verse unfolding in two stages. Joseph makes his plans; meanwhile the officials and dignitaries make theirs, yet not necessarily at his behest. Having capitulated (or not!) to the forty days of embalming as was customary, and to the seventy days of mourning as was likewise customary, Joseph seeks finally to execute his father’s wish, to reappropriate the tone and tenor of the process that would ostensibly be the breakaway point from Egyptian custom. From Joseph’s perspective, the entire process is once again appropriated: lo and behold, here come the officials and dignitaries. The scene is both comic and tragic at the same moment. Even as Joseph wrings his hands trying to perform this most un-Egyptian of deeds, and ever aware of his inner estrangement from the Egyptian cult of Osiris, the crowds of dignitaries flock to book their tickets to Canaan, as it were, in an immense show of reverence for him. At the same time, it is worthy of note that only after three groups of Egyptian officials are listed in v. 7 do we learn in v. 8 that the entourage also includes Joseph’s brothers and the entire Jacob clan. The implication is that this is a state funeral first, with relatives of no distinction at the back of the procession.

The corps mentioned in 50:9, we are told, was “very large,” and it would seem that it was assembled to impress, as is the case in a similar use of language in 1 Kgs 10:2: “[The Queen of Sheba] arrived in Jerusalem with a very large corps (חֵיל כָּבֵד מְאֹד), with camels bearing spices, a great quantity of gold, and precious stones.”

Like many commentators, the *NJPS* translation treats the verb וַיַּעֲלוּ as a qal form and takes the chariots and horsemen to be the subject of the verse. Alternatively, the verb may be understood as hiphil, in which case the subject of the verb is Joseph, and it is Joseph who initiates the assembly of this honor guard.³³ Two pieces of evidence favor the latter reading. The first is that this honor guard is set apart from the earlier three groups of Egyptians mentioned in 50:7, who came of their own accord (“not at Joseph’s behest”), which would be well explained if Joseph had initiated their participation. Second, note the preposition used to

³² The text of Seforno’s commentary on the Pentateuch may be found in any edition of the *Miqra’ot Gedolot*, the medieval rabbinic parallel to the *Glossa Ordinaria*. A relatively modern edition is that of *Torat Chaim* (ed. M. L. Katzenelenbogen; 7 vols.; Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1987).

³³ This interpretation is found in the commentary of R. Samuel b. Meir, a twelfth-century grandson of Rashi. It is adopted as well by Abarbanel and by Lowenthal, *Joseph Narrative*, 149.

describe their participation in the entourage. Concerning the three groups mentioned in v. 7, the text has וַיַּעֲלוּ אִתּוֹ, “and they went up with him.” Yet concerning the chariots and the drivers, the text says וַיַּעַל עִמּוֹ. Whereas the meaning of the two prepositions is nearly synonymous, the preposition עִם often marks a personal complement when it follows a verb.³⁴ If we understand the verb as a hiphil, with Joseph as the actor, then in a sense Joseph has come full circle. Initially, he had planned to execute the journey and funeral without pomp and circumstance. Upon seeing the immense display of the Egyptian aristocracy, Joseph now adds his own touch to make the occasion an Egyptian one and initiates the participation of the military. This corps is not merely “alongside” him (as in וַיַּעֲלוּ אִתּוֹ), but “with” him (as in וַיַּעַל עִמּוֹ).

Two activities of mourning are reported at Goren ha-Atad (50:10). In the first, “they held there a very great and solemn lamentation,” (וַיִּסְפְּדוּ שָׁם מְסֹפֶד גָּדוֹל), while the second clause states, “and he observed a mourning period of seven days for his father” (וַיַּעַשׂ לְאָבִיו אָבֵל שִׁבְעַת יָמִים). The shift in subject allows us to perceive the seven-day mourning period as a more intimate event than the “very great lamentation,” which seems to have been a very large and public affair, as attested by the local inhabitants in the next verse. With the exception of the flood narrative of Genesis 6–8, no other pentateuchal passage is as sensitive to the demarcation of time as is the passage at hand. Following Jacob’s death, forty days are dedicated to embalming his corpse (50:3). A total of seventy days of mourning is marked in Egypt (v. 4). Why, we might ask, does Joseph observe an additional period of mourning?

The actions attributed to the Egyptians and to Joseph, respectively, may be seen in light of prevailing mourning customs in the ancient Near East. Following the seventy-day mourning that was customary in Egypt, a procession would accompany the body to the tomb. Outside the tomb, the entourage would take its leave of the body amid an elaborate set of ceremonies that would include divine mourners, incantations of protection for the deceased, female lamenters, ritual dancers, and a full-scale funerary banquet.³⁵ In Gen 50:12 and 13 we see that only Joseph and the sons continue into the land of Canaan to bury their father. For the Egyptians, in essence, the station at Goren ha-Atad is the moment at which they part from the body of the deceased. The description of a “very great lamentation”

³⁴ Bruce K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990) 219. A similar nuance is suggested in *A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar* (ed. Christo H. J. van der Merwe, Jackie A. Naudé, and Jan H. Kroeze; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999) 279, 293.

³⁵ A. J. Spencer, *Death in Ancient Egypt* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1982) 51–53; Stacie L. Olson, “Burial Practices,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt* (ed. Donald B. Redford; 3 vols.; Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) 1. 215; Ann Macy Roth, “Funerary Ritual,” *ibid.*, 1. 577–78.

at this juncture in the procession accords with royal Egyptian funerary practice. By contrast, the notion of a seven-day mourning period is known to us from biblical Israel, Ugarit, and Mesopotamia, but was not considered a customary period for mourning in ancient Egypt.³⁶ The earlier periods of time mentioned in this passage reflect Egyptian customs and norms. As the party enters into the land of Canaan, Joseph removes himself from the Egyptian observances surrounding him and adopts a demarcation of time that is Semitic in origin, a frame of time in which to recapture the tone and tenor of the occasion in a manner more true to his Semitic origins.

In Gen 50:11 the focal point shifts to a somewhat unusual location; it is no longer the protagonists of the story who are at the center of the action, but rather the Canaanites, viewed from the non-Israelite “sidelines.” The biblical author wanted not merely to tell how impressive the funeral is (which we already sense), but to underscore just how *Egyptian* it is—note the objective testimony of the Canaanite onlookers, who identify it as an Egyptian event. How tragic, indeed, that “Israel,” whose identity resisted Egypt and looked to rejoining the ancestral heritage, in death is considered fully Egyptian—from the first actions of the embalmers to the onlookers at the procession, who see in Israel’s funeral Egypt and only Egypt.

As indicated at the outset of the exposition to this passage, Gen 50:12-13 closes the rupture opened following Jacob’s last commands and death. It is now that “his sons did for him as he had instructed them.” In v. 8, they had been the last party mentioned in the long list of the entourage of vv. 7-8. One can almost see these bearded Semites making their way forward through the Egyptian diplomatic throng to bear the coffin and cross the Jordan. Benno Jacob has correctly noted that from the moment when the coffin is lifted and carried to the grave, no more distinction is made between Joseph and his brothers.³⁷ To this we may add, that the biblical author here follows the convention established earlier in the Book of Genesis. At the burials of Abraham (25:9) and Isaac (35:29), respectively, once-discordant sons are brought together in a solemn act of filial fealty. Moreover, the equal footing granted to all the sons here signals that the play of tension between “coloring it Egyptian” and “coloring it Hebrew,” at whose core stood the figure of Joseph, is now over. The narrative that Jacob had envisioned for himself is the narrative of vv. 12 and 13 alone. The elaborate description of the

³⁶ See 1 Sam 31:13; 1 Chr 10:12; 2 Sam 11:27; Job 2:13; Jdt 16:24; Sir 10:12. For Ugarit, see *The Tale of Aqhat* in *Corpus des Tablettes en Cunéiformes Alphabétiques* (ed. A. Herdner; Mission de Ras-Shamra; Paris: Geuthner, 1963) 17.1.16 (*ANET*, 150). For Mesopotamia, see *Epic of Gilgamesh* Old Babylonian version 10.2.5-9 (*ANET*, 90); *Curse of Agade* 2:199 in *The Curse of Agade* (ed. Jerrold S. Cooper; Johns Hopkins Near Eastern Studies; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983) 59.

³⁷ Jacob, *Erste Buch*, 339.

Cave of Machpelah in v. 13 echoes the longing, reminiscent tone with which the patriarch himself had described the site in 49:29-32.

The procession to Canaan had relegated the family members to the back of the entourage. Yet in returning to Canaan they are mentioned first (50:14). The clumsy syntax at the close of the verse can be explained as an echo of Gen 50:5. The last clause of v. 14, "after he had buried his father" (אַחֲרֵי קִבְרוֹ אֶת אָבִיו) recalls Joseph's commitment to Pharaoh in v. 5: "Now, therefore, let me go up and bury my father (וְאֶקְבְּרָה אֶת אָבִי) and I shall return." Indeed, the sons "had done as their father had commanded them." The literary rupture signaled by the distance between the command and the fulfillment reflects the rupture in the spirit of the funeral itself. Interment is only the penultimate note of this burial narrative. Its final note witnesses Joseph honoring his pledge to Pharaoh.

III. Conclusion

We have seen how the narratives of Jacob's death and burial present two paradigms of how the identity politics of Hebrewness are negotiated when marginalized within the foreign culture of Egypt. The first is that of Jacob, the strident patriarch. With the exception of one grudging encounter with Pharaoh (47:8-10), Jacob seems to have no encounter with Egyptian culture, and indeed celebrates his difference as a Hebrew. His request to be buried as a patriarch is absolute, with no seeming consideration or concern for how this will be received by the court or what the attendant consequences might be for his descendants.

The other paradigm is that of Joseph, viceroy of Egypt. Joseph, too, cherishes his Hebrew heritage—witness his last testament in 50:24-25. Yet Joseph all along is acutely aware of the responsibility that rests on his shoulders alone to ensure the welfare of the clan. Hebrew difference may indeed be celebrated—but only in manifestations within the family. When the clan is resettled in the segregated region of Goshen, Hebrew cultural autonomy is a value that is spoken of within the clan, but not before the court. The embalmment of Jacob's body may be presented to the Hebrew clan as a necessary step that indeed honors Jacob's desire to be buried elsewhere. Yet, before the court, the same event will be presented as an overture to Egyptian culture. Throughout his career, Joseph struggles for equilibrium, for the balanced expression of a politically expedient commitment to both host and heritage, to both father and Pharaoh.

Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.