

WOMEN IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

A READER

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His Story Versus Her Story

Male Genealogy and Female Strategy in the Jacob Cycle

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A text, according to the definition that French semiotician Roland Barthes (73-81) has given the word, is not a literary work or a portion of it, but its conceptualization, that is to say, a reading. Roland Barthes's concept of textuality is often illustrated by the following two metaphors. In the first, the reader is compared to a musician for whom interpretation is an activity, a personal rendition of an original score. Like the musician, the reader proposes a personal understanding of the meaningful aspects of a literary work. Because it is the perception of the reader which creates the text, its coherence is in the eyes of the reader and not in the intentionality of the author(s), narrator(s), or editor(s). The etymology of the word "text" leads us to the second metaphor used to explain the reading process. The Latin noun *texere* means not only text, passage of scripture, but also texture, tissue, structure, and context; the verb *texere* is translated "to construct," "to compose," "to weave." Thus the text is often described as a fabric, a network, or a web. The reader's interest is focused on the materiality of the literary work, the fabric of its narrativity, in other words the processes by which and through which stories are told and understood. The interlacing of narrative threads, the weaving and wavering of the plot, the matter in which a yarn is spun create a substratum of meaning that structures, supports, or undermines our understanding of the story. Insofar as it examines the systems of signs that allow literary communication to take place, textual criticism belongs to the semiotic enterprise. Understood as a semiotic exercise, textual criticism is a reading process that differs substantially in its practice and presuppositions from classical biblical textual approaches and from traditional notions of formal or textual criticism.

Though any number of narrative, linguistic, or thematic features may be used as heuristic devices for a textual reading, features that describe or refer to interpretation are particularly inviting for the semiotician. Thus, characters that function as interpreters and events that emphasize communicative acts are powerful poles of attraction.¹ In this

respect, the seduction scene between Joseph and Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39) beckons the interest of the reader, for it deals with two contrary interpretations of one event, two seemingly antithetical readings. Potiphar's wife gives a willfully misleading explanation, which her husband, nonetheless, believes. They are the first set of narrator-narratee encoded in the text. A differing perception of the same event is suggested by the anonymous biblical narrator and Joseph, both of whom guarantee the existence of another viewpoint.

When Jacob's beloved Joseph was taken to Egypt, he was sold to Potiphar, an Egyptian, an officer of Pharaoh and captain of the guard. Pleased with Joseph, Potiphar makes him overseer of his house. While in Potiphar's employ, Joseph, who, according to the narrator, is handsome, attracts the attention of his master's wife. She tries to seduce him. He rejects her advances and explains his refusal in these terms: "Lo, having me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my hand; he is not greater in this house than I am; nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself, because you are his wife; how then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" (Gen 39:9-10). However, one day when Joseph is alone in the house, Potiphar's wife grabs him by his coat and again makes overtures. He runs out of the house leaving the garment behind in her hands. She calls in the men of the household and tells them the following: "See, he has brought among us a Hebrew to insult us, he came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice; and when he heard that I lifted up my voice and cried, he left his garment with me, and fled and got out of the house" (Gen 39:15-16). She later repeats the same story to her husband, and Joseph is imprisoned.

One piece of clothing, two stories. His story versus her story. In this episode, Joseph's piece of attire is the mediating object between divergent desires. Here, one garment suggests a male and a female text, two gender-marked readings.

If we were to listen solely to the words of Potiphar's wife, as the servants and her husband do, without the leading comments of the narrator, the abandoned garment would stand for his desire and her refusal. The narrator, however, lets us know that Joseph had on previous occasions rejected her advances and that her story is fictional, a total fabrication. Whereas the garment represents for Joseph his loyalty to his master, for her the garment becomes a means of manipulation, a strategic device for a successful frame-up. The interpretation she proposes for the presence of the garment shows that explanation is a matter of point of view and further suggests that it is neither the truth nor the falsehood of the story that matters, but its plausibility. Her husband believes her story, and Joseph is sent to prison. For Joseph, the abandoned garment represents his rejection of Potiphar's wife, and therefore his loyalty to his master, and ultimately his obedience to God. George W. Coats (89) points out that in the context of Joseph's relation to power, the abandoned garment shows first of all "a kind of human enlightenment, a commitment to a fellow man because he is a fellow who trusts the relationship, commitment to a relationship because only in that relationship does life make sense."

For Joseph, garments do have a special meaning and do suggest a specific bond between men. His father, Jacob, gives him a long robe with sleeves for he "loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age" (Gen 37:3). Joseph's brothers become resentful and their jealousy turns to hatred after Joseph reports on them to their father and then recounts his dreams, which, according to them,

predict that they will bow to him. When Jacob sends his favorite son to see if the others are doing well in the pastures, Joseph's brothers conspire to kill him. Reuben, the oldest, succeeds in convincing them to spare the boy's life. They strip Joseph of his robe and put him in a pit. Midianite traders passing by rescue the boy from the pit and sell him to Ishmaelites. Upon discovering that Joseph had disappeared from the pit where they had hidden him, the brothers take Joseph's robe, dip it in the blood of a goat, and show it to their father. Joseph's bloodied robe stands in lieu of an explanation, and Jacob understandably concludes that his favorite son has been devoured by a wild beast.

Jacob gave Joseph the robe as a token of his affection for him. Joseph abandons his coat in the hands of Potiphar's wife; his stated reason is his respect for his master. In both cases, a piece of attire represents an emotional link, a trust between men. When the Pharaoh makes Joseph vizier of Egypt, he gives the young Hebrew not only his signet ring but also garments of fine linen and a gold chain (Gen 41:42). Joseph will mark his reconciliation with his brothers by giving them ceremonial garments as well as provisions before they leave Egypt (Gen 45:21). For the men, garments express feelings. When overcome with grief, men tear their clothes. Reuben, upon discovering Joseph's disappearance, "rends" his clothes (Gen 37:29), and so does Jacob upon being shown Joseph's bloodied robe (Gen 37:34). Later on, when they are accused of having stolen the divining cup, Joseph's brothers too "rend" their clothes (Gen 44:13). Whether a token of love and respect or a sign of despair and mourning, for Jacob and his sons, garments are symbolic items.

By giving Joseph a long robe with sleeves, Jacob sets Joseph apart from his brothers. Joseph will emulate his father's partiality, for he will give his full brother Benjamin not just one ceremonial vestment, as he gave his other brothers, but "three hundred shekels of silver and five fessel garments" (Gen 45:22). By distinguishing among siblings without regard to the order of birth, Jacob sets up a hierarchical order founded on the father's liking for a child, and garments are the distinguishing markers of this new filial order. Joseph's robe establishes a visible link between father and son, the seal of approval for all to see of Joseph's election as favorite son and legitimate heir. Items of clothing are the textual signifiers which, in the latter part of Genesis, support the theme of sibling rivalry and the resulting victory of the youngest. They implement the new hierarchical order of elective dominance in opposition to the "natural" predetermined rule of sovereignty of the first and oldest.

When Rebekah was pregnant with Esau and Jacob, the Lord told her: "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples, born of you, shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger" (Gen 25:23). The story of Jacob actualizes the words of the Lord. Esau, the first-born, "came forth red, all his body like a hairy mantle" (Gen 25:25). Jacob first bought Esau's birthright in exchange for some bread and soup. Then, at the urging of Rebekah, Jacob put on his brother's attire. He covered his hands and neck with the skin of kids fetched so that Rebekah could prepare some savory food for him to bring Isaac. Impersonating his brother, Jacob secured Isaac's blessing meant for Esau.

Robert Alter (10-11) reminds us that the midrashic commentators had already noted that the goat and kid established connecting threads between the Judah and Tamar episode and the Joseph story: "The Holy one Praised be He said to Judah, 'You deceived your father with a kid. By your life, Tamar will deceive you with a kid. . . .'"

The kids prepared by Rebekah also belong to this network, and Esau's garment now in Jacob's possession provides us with yet another connecting thread between the stories of Jacob and those of Joseph and Judah. Judah Goldin (27-44) attributes the presence of the Judah and Tamar episode, which is embedded in the story of Joseph, to the themes of fraternal rivalry. Garments, as we have seen, form the textual support of this theme, and they play as well a prominent role in the story of Judah and Tamar.

Tamar, the widow of Judah's eldest son Er, has remained childless because Onan, Judah's second son, "spilled the semen on the ground, lest he should give offspring to his brother" (Gen 38:9). We are told that this displeased God, and Onan too was slain. Judah sends Tamar back to her father's house promising to send his last son Shelah to her when the lad is grown up. Time passes. Judah does not honor his promise. Having learned that Judah, now himself a widower, was going to shear his sheep, Tamar takes off her widow's clothes, puts on a veil, and sits by the roadside. Judah mistakes her for a harlot and asks to "come into her" (Gen 38:16). She accepts on the condition that she be given his signet, cord, and staff as a pledge of payment for her favors. This time Judah will be true to his word and send her a kid from his flock, but Tamar, having taken off the harlot's veil and dressed in her widow's garment again, cannot be found by Judah's envoy. Three months later, Judah learns that his daughter-in-law is pregnant by harlotry. He orders that she be burned, but upon being shown the signet, the cord, and staff which he recognizes as his, Judah declares: "she is more righteous than I, inasmuch as I did not give her my son Shelah" (Gen 38:26).

In the first ruse, Tamar simply exchanges two symbolically marked garments: the widow's clothes, which denote the absence of both husband and sexual relations; a harlot's veil, which advertises readiness for intercourse without parental responsibility. As Onan's punishment suggests and Judah's words confirm, the point of the story is not sexuality but fertility to assure the family's line of descent, a significance which the harlot's veil does not imply. Tamar's second stratagem is shrewder. Like Potiphar's wife, Tamar makes pieces of attire serve her own interest and purpose. The signet, cord, and staff were supposed to be the guarantee of payment Tamar was to receive for her favors. Tamar, however, does not use these objects as promissory notes. For her the importance of the signet, cord, and staff resides neither in their value as objects nor as down payment for a pledge; they are desirable only because they function as signatures, as evidence of the identity of the progenitor, as proof in a paternity suit. These objects are not meant simply to reveal her identity; rather their purpose is to establish a link between father and progeny, thereby legitimizing the births of Perez and Zerah. Judah's cord, signet, and staff belong to the same network of signifiers as Joseph's robe or the coat Joseph leaves in the hands of Potiphar's wife. They are the visual markers of a father (or master) and son relationship.

Tamar, like Rebekah, gives birth to twins. While she is in labor, one child puts out a hand to which the midwife attaches a scarlet thread. It is the other child, however, who comes out first. Because the midwife exclaims: "What a breach you made for yourself" (Gen 38:29), the first-born is named Perez, which means "a breach." The second child, the one with the red thread around his wrist, is called Zerah. The birth of Perez and Zerah is emblematic of the Joseph story, for like Zerah, who guides his older brother by widening the birth canal, Joseph as vizier of the Pharaoh directs his older brothers when they come to Egypt to fetch food.

The birth of Perez and Zerah recalls the birth of Esau and Jacob. The two sets of twins form a chiasmus. The "red hairy mantle" which distinguishes Esau, the oldest, becomes the red thread around the youngest's wrist. By wearing Esau's attire, Jacob makes Esau's distinguishing marking—namely, his "red hairy mantle"—his own. Isaac's blessing assures Jacob's superiority over his brother, and the garment becomes the signifier of Jacob's prominence. Similarly, when Jacob gives Joseph a long robe with sleeves, it symbolizes Joseph's superiority; and, when the bloodied robe is returned to Jacob, it signals Joseph's elimination from the line of succession. In Egypt, his brothers may well bow before him, but it is not Joseph's progeny that will assure the might of the people of Israel. That task, as we know, will be assumed by Judah's descendant, for Reuben, Jacob's oldest, had sexual intercourse with Bilhah, his father's concubine (Gen 35:22), thus revealing himself unworthy of his father's trust. It is therefore fitting that in his blessing to his sons, Jacob should distinguish Judah, his chosen heir, by his red garment, thereby bestowing upon him, albeit metaphorically, the symbolic marker of genuine legacy. Judah, Jacob tells us, "washes his garments in wine and his vesture in the blood of grapes" (Gen 49:11). In Genesis, Jacob's line of descent stops with the description of the birth of Perez and Zerah; the fact that it is not Zerah but Perez who is named in the ancestry of David (Matt 1:3) suggests that the sibling rivalries characteristic of the Jacob cycle continued beyond the events recounted in Genesis. However, since the eventual ascendancy of Perez lies outside the content of Genesis, it plays no part in the narrative processes at work in the Jacob cycle. For Michael Fishbane (38), the power of the Jacob cycle is that "it personalizes the tensions and dialectics which are also crystallized on a national level at later points: the struggle for blessing; the threat of discontinuity; the conflicts between and within generations; and the wrestling for birth, name and destiny." In the Jacob cycle, garments form the subtext which upholds these concerns. From Jacob to Joseph to Judah to Zerah, the red thread establishes an order of filiation, a metaphorical umbilical cord that relates directly, without the mediation of women, father to son to grandson.

As the Judah and Tamar episode illustrates, in such a system what matters is not who bears the child but the identity of the father. In this male-marked genealogy, women have no say. Their role is strictly biological. The womb as the relevant place of origin is superseded by the progenitor's authority, and ranking of siblings becomes a father's prerogative. It is therefore not surprising that Jacob favors Joseph not because he is the first-born of his beloved Rachel but because Joseph is "the son of his old age" (Gen 37:3).

Following the path of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Judah Goldin (44) reminds us that stories function somewhat like myths, for they provide acceptable channels for the expression of discontent:

The law of God may not be abolished, and besides, for the most part, the society assents to its terms because without these there would be chaos. But the resentments are nonetheless real! How are these to find an outlet? By folktales and folklore. Here no frontal attack is made on the divine law. That is the policy of rebellion. But in stories and fables one turns the order of the world upside down without giving up the establishment that provides protection. This is the revenge of the weak against the strong.

For Judah Goldin, "the revenge of the weak against the strong" refers to the theme of fraternal rivalry and the triumph of the youngest. In order to be counted once again

among Jacob's sons, Joseph uses a personal item as a ploy to force recognition. The silver divination cup he has placed in Benjamin's sack of grain (Gen 44:2) serves as an excuse to get his brothers to stand before him so that he can reveal his identity to them. Joseph's stratagem recalls the ploys of Rebekah, Potiphar's wife, and Tamar, who like him use objects as the mediating device for their own personal ends. Sibling rivalry and the ensuing importance of the father and son bond erase the privilege of rank among wives and reduce women's function strictly to their reproductive role. In such a patriarchal system, women are still needed, but they are nonetheless outsiders. When Rebekah, Potiphar's wife, or Tamar use a piece of attire for their own personal ends, they do not create a gratuitous disturbance in the order of things. Although in a world under divine guidance their actions can be said to actualize the Lord's will, these actions can also be seen as the expression of women's resentment and rebellion. When Rebekah suggests that Jacob take his brother's place, or when Potiphar's wife tries to seduce Joseph, or when Tamar calls attention to Judah's progeny, their interference breaks up the exclusive father-son dialogue and forces recognition of their presence. It is therefore not surprising that in the cycle of Jacob, the women use pieces of attire—which are the symbolic markers of the father-son relationship—to reinscribe themselves in the patriarchal system. Their intervention in the sequence of events ruptures the continuum of the narrative and reveals the patterns interwoven in the textual fabric. In the latter part of Genesis, garments have his and her story to tell: as used by men, garments form a communicative channel from which women are excluded; but when used by women, garments function as communicative devices between the sexes. For the men, garments are symbolic markers of filial love and recognition, whereas for the women they serve as a means of self-inscription in a system that neglects them. Christine Garside Allen argues that, in securing for Jacob Isaac's blessing meant for Esau, Rebekah was only carrying out God's wishes. For Allen, it is not Isaac but Rebekah who through her selfless obedience shows herself to be a model of sanctity. "It is tempting," she writes (168–69), "to bring Rebekah into relief by maintaining that Isaac was not a saint. In this way Rebekah would be the necessary link between Abraham and Jacob." Allen's analysis clearly shows that, even if seen as a consecrated deed and interpreted from a psychological viewpoint, Rebekah's deceitful action ultimately disturbs the exclusively male genealogical lineage.

For Isaac, as for Jacob and Judah, garments have a fixed meaning: Esau's tunic and Joseph's robe represent specific individuals, Isaac mistakes the garment for the wearer and thus gives his blessing to Jacob instead of Esau. As for Judah, he is unable to recognize his daughter-in-law behind the prostitute's veil. Whereas for the men garments have a determined, precise meaning, that is to say, a truth value, for the women clothes are nothing but signifiers open to a variety of meanings; they are items whose function and referential meaning can easily be changed. When Tamar exchanges her widow's dress for the prostitute's veil, she simultaneously calls attention to two social functions of garments: first, their use as symbols in the sexual code; and, second, their use as masks and disguises. When Potiphar's wife points to Joseph's coat at her side as the proof of Joseph's attempt to seduce her, her story is believable because she provides a sexual significance to an item which, in the social context, can have a sexual referential meaning. She also uses Joseph's coat to hide her own sexual desire. Because for women, garments do not necessarily refer to a specific individual or convey solely one message, they are the place of juncture for a multiplicity of meanings, the locus for the expression of divergent

desires. For Tamar, as for Potiphar's wife or Rebekah, garments are the means by which they impart their desire to play a relevant role in the patriarchal hierarchy. By pluralizing the meaning of a piece of attire, Rebekah, Potiphar's wife, and Tamar explode and thereby subvert the closure of the patriarchal representational system and symbolic code. Thus, in the latter part of Genesis, the function of garments, as understood by the women of the cycle of Jacob, can serve as the very metaphor for textuality and the deconstructive nature of modern reading practices which Barbara Johnson (3) describes as "a careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text." The patterns woven in the biblical narrative take their shape from the filling as well as the warp: the two strands may have different functions, but they are equally necessary to the making of the textual fabric.

Because it can be construed as a representation of different critical approaches, the episode between Joseph and Potiphar's wife (Gen 39) provided me with a point of entry into the text. Joseph rejects the advances of his master's wife and runs out of the house leaving his coat behind; Potiphar's wife tells her husband that Joseph tried to seduce her; Potiphar believes her and Joseph is incarcerated. Potiphar accepts his wife's explanation because her story does seem plausible, after all. And besides, since for the men in the Jacob cycle garments are a sign of trust and have a symbolic power that lends them even more verity, in the eyes of Potiphar Joseph's "abandoned" coat gives added credence to his wife's words. However, in accepting his wife's explanation as stated, Potiphar ignores the possibility of personal motivation. He is blind not only to his wife's self-serving reasons, but equally blind to what may be his own reasons for wanting to believe her. Potiphar's attitude is an example of a critical perspective that leaves unquestioned both the subjective needs of the storyteller and the conscious or unconscious investment of the interpreter. Yet for each of the characters in this episode, the coat has a special meaning. For Joseph and the biblical narrator, the coat stands as the proof of Joseph's innocence; for Potiphar's wife, it is the reminder of her frustrated desire; for her husband, the evidence of Joseph's guilt. Joseph's coat is the place of juncture for diverging desires; the textual fabric of a narrative is similarly the locus and the product of the interaction of the narrator's and the reader's subjectivities. Not unlike the story told by Potiphar's wife, my version of the stories in the Jacob cycle may be warped, skewed by my feminist and critical concerns. But on the other hand, the anonymous biblical narrator wages for Joseph's innocence. In siding with Joseph, the narrator embraces the ideological structure which Joseph serves, namely, the male desire for an exclusive bond between men. On the question of family lineage or on the subject of human relationships, the position of the biblical narrator is no more "neutral" than that of the feminist reader.

NOTES

1. For a discussion of the question of reading and its relation to criticism, see Suleiman.

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