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Failure of *Catharsis*

The Reconstruction of Joseph's Moral Intent in Two Post-Biblical Narratives

Due to the sparseness of its narrative style, the biblical story of Joseph has prompted later scholars and writers to expand upon its suggestive meanings. In this essay, I examine two post-biblical retellings of the Joseph story, the medieval *Book of Yashar* and the allegedly pre-Christian series of deathbed "testaments" known collectively as *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*. These texts, elaborating imaginatively on details contained in the biblical model, draw distinctly different conclusions regarding the nature of the protagonist and the process by which he reconciles with his brothers. Although each of these three narratives meets some of the generic and moral expectations of the audiences to which they originally were addressed, I suggest that the post-biblical retellings ultimately fall short of the compressed suggestiveness and cathartic potency of the biblical narrative. In developing these claims, I will identify the rhetorical, lexical, and thematic features that distinguish the two later works from the biblical version.

1. Introduction

Since its rendering in the Hebrew Bible, the story of Joseph has provided literary and theological scholars with a complicated model for the resolution of conflict. While emphasis often has been placed on the magnanimity of Joseph's act of forgiveness, the question of the *process* by which he arrives at this decisive moment frequently has been overlooked. Joseph's reunion with his brothers – far from a certain outcome – represents the product of a heart in turmoil: Joseph naturally feels both love and hatred for his brothers, and it is his own emotional response to their presence that ultimately enables him to transcend the division between them. I suggest that this transcendence translates, for readers, into something like *catharsis*, in the Aristotelian sense: We suffer with, and ultimately share the emotional release of, the characters in their moment of embrace. Yet the sparseness of the biblical narrative also requires readers to fill the many gaps (Sternberg 1985; Boyarin 1990) and details that are left to the imagination, and this has led to a curious range of interpretation in post-biblical retellings of the story (see, for example, Kugel 1990).

In this essay, I will examine two such retellings, each of which derives distinctly different conclusions about Joseph's thoughts, feelings and motives. I will begin with a detailed review of the biblical story, highlighting the narrative progression that, I claim, engenders a *cathartic* response in readers. By "narrative

progression,” I generally refer to the definition provided by Phelan (2007, 3; cf. Phelan and Rabinowitz 2012, 57-59):

the synthesis of both the textual dynamics that govern the movement of narrative from beginning through middle to end and the readerly dynamics—what I have so far been calling our engagement—that both follow from and influence those textual dynamics.

This combination of “textual dynamics” and readers’ responses to those dynamics as they progress through a given narrative is particularly relevant to my claims regarding the three Joseph narratives and the different impressions of Joseph and his brothers that they are likely to produce.

After analyzing this progression in the biblical narrative, I will then examine the retelling that I consider the more radical departure from the tone of the Bible’s presentation of the reconciliation, the medieval midrashic narrative *The Book of Yasbar* (*Sefer ha-Yasbar*).¹ This text, while displaying through its language and stylistic patterns characteristics that have been described as “pseudobiblical” (Kugel 1990, 31), nevertheless attributes to Joseph a certain moral weakness and cowardice that stand in stark contrast with the biblical version. On the other hand, the second work – part of the pseudepigraphical series of deathbed ‘testaments’ known collectively as *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* – presents a startlingly different picture. In this text, Joseph – particularly the adult Joseph – is represented as an essentially faultless being, one whose every action, including his act of forgiveness, is seen as the perfect embodiment of divinely-inspired principles. While I claim that this treatment, in contrast with that found in *The Book of Yasbar*, adheres more closely to the spirit of reconciliation as it is characterized in the Bible, I will show that the absence in Joseph of moral doubt and conflicted motive lends this version a certain aloofness that deprives it of the moral urgency of the biblical narrative. Indeed, although each of these three narratives meets some of the generic, theological and moral expectations of the audiences to which they originally were addressed, I suggest that both of the post-biblical retellings ultimately fall short of the compressed suggestiveness and cathartic potency of the biblical narrative’s portrayal of the protagonist’s reconciliation with his brothers. In this essay, therefore, I will identify some of the narrative features – rhetorical, lexical, and thematic – that distinguish the two later works from the biblical version.²

2. Conflict and Reconciliation in the Biblical Story of Joseph

In considering elements in the Hebrew Bible that intrinsically linked that text to the New Testament, some patristic writers contended that the life and experiences of Joseph prefigured those of Jesus (see, for example, Argyle 1956). In particular, some saw in Joseph’s rejection by his brothers and his willingness to forgive them relative parallels to Jesus’ rejection by the Jewish community and his injunction to “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:44; cf. Argyle 1956, 199).³ In developing this formulation, however, the

contention of Joseph's divinity is never made: Joseph, unlike Jesus, merely possesses divine *inspiration*, and the actions that he takes and their reception by readers must be understood in this light. I contend, indeed, that it is precisely Joseph's *struggle* to be moral, to transcend ignorance, to ultimately serve God in a repentant way that renders him sympathetic to readers.⁴ Rather than providing a model of perfect conduct, Joseph is like us in the sense that he encounters doubt, behaves selfishly and vainly, uses deception, allows himself to remain ignorant of social inequity as he serves Pharaoh, and so forth. His gradual return from self-concern and self-aggrandizement to a more brotherly and theocentric sensibility, furthermore, constitutes what Sol Schimmel (1988, 59-65) terms a "paradigm of repentance," in that the narrative represents a hero whose travails we are called upon to identify with, and whose ultimate transcendence of them we are moved to experience.⁵

2.1 Cracks in the Wall of Virtue

In order to appreciate the magnitude of Joseph's repentance – indeed, to realize the great distance that readers must travel before they can allow themselves to identify with him – we must address the rather extensive weaknesses in his character that manifest themselves throughout the narrative. Hillel Barzel (1975, 89) alludes to this notion when, in comparing Joseph to the protagonists in Kafka's *The Trial* and *The Castle*, he writes, "These [characters] are both heroes who, like Joseph in the Bible story, have accusations brought against them while personally quite unconscious of having transgressed." It is significant that Barzel designates Joseph's reality as one of unconsciousness, rather than innocence, since transgression through ignorance does not relieve the transgressor of culpability. Joseph indeed transgresses not only through unconsciousness and/or ignorance, but also in more conscious and intended ways. I will consider the degree to which these behaviors are mitigated or redeemed later in this essay; for the moment, I shall identify several of his actions individually and in terms of the way they operate within the overall design of the narrative.

This design, in fact, is critical to our understanding of the ways that Joseph's character is elaborated in the biblical narrative. My comparison between the biblical version and the two post-biblical retellings relies, to a considerable degree, on the suggestion that the former leaves out details that the later versions provide. This is remarkable, in that the biblical story of Joseph is by far the longest and most elaborate narrative in Genesis, and it possesses characteristics that are very distinct from those of the other stories in that book of the Bible. W. Lee Humphreys (1985, 82-96) argues that the narrative can be classified as a form of "novella," a term that carries with it something of the secular-romantic. Indeed, Donald B. Redford narrows the definition by calling the Joseph story a "Märchen-Novella" (1970, 67-68), or folk tale-novella, by identifying its origin and basic thematic sensibility in the Near Eastern folk tradition. George W.

Coats (1983, 265-66), while viewing the Joseph story as a component in the larger “Jacob saga,” likewise sees the story as a novella yet with strong tendencies toward “legend,” the function of which is the “edification of its audience” through the actions or example of its hero (ibid., 9). Whichever term we might choose to adopt, all of them suggest a narrative that is elaborate in detail and development, in stark contrast with the narratives of other significant figures in Genesis, such as that of Cain, whose entire narrative is dispatched within twenty-six verses (Gen. 4: 1-26). Moreover, the Joseph narrative is highly episodic, moving progressively from his favored status in comparison with his brothers, to his brothers’ betrayal of him, his imprisonment, his ascension to Pharaoh’s right-hand man, his reconciliation with his brothers, and his reunion with his father. In other words, we are presented with a detailed account of the arc of Joseph’s life, as well as a progressive portrait of his personality.

Figuring most integrally in our realization of Joseph’s personality is the question of his relationship, as a boy, with his brothers. The narrative itself suggests that Joseph is despised primarily due to the favoritism shown him by his father and what the brothers assume to be Joseph’s arrogance in relating his dreams (Gen. 37:3-11). In one sense, Joseph’s compulsion to share his dreams is necessary to the logic of the biblical narrative: In order for his brothers to participate in the realization of those dreams *as prophesies*, they first need to be angered by what they tell about Joseph’s sense of his own superiority over them. On this level, whereby Joseph merely is fulfilling his part in a larger scheme, it is difficult to ascribe to Joseph any intentional malice. He is truthful, perhaps even blunt to the point of disregarding the impact of his tone and behavior on others, but – at this point, at least – he is not cruel.

Having said this, there certainly is sufficient evidence to suggest that, more than simply disregarding the impact that he has on others, Joseph is ignorant of this effect, in much the same way that he appears ignorant of the strain that his father’s favoritism places on his relationship with his brothers. The text records no instance of doubt or hesitation on Joseph’s part, and even notes that, despite his brothers’ jealousy and hatred, Joseph persists in relating the dream in which he is shown to rule over them (Gen. 37:4-8), after which “they hated him yet the more for his dreams, and for his words” (Gen. 37:9).⁶ Some scholars, in fact, have suggested that Joseph’s behavior toward his brothers manifests cruelty in a more overt sense. Identifying what he describes as the “dual image of Joseph,” Earle Hilgert (1985, 6) points to the ambiguity of the words *dbtm r’h* [דבתם רעה] (Gen. 37:2), which he translates as “an evil slander against them [his brothers].” While divergent glosses of the phrase can be found in respected translations, Isaac Jerusalemi’s philological investigation of the text tends to support Hilgert’s perspective. Jerusalemi (1968, 4) notes the meanings for דבה as “whispering, defamation, evil report,” indicating that the sense of gossip or even slander is inherent to the word. This implication is reinforced by the adjective that follows it, רעה, meaning “bad” or “evil” (ibid., 4-5). Thus, the assertion of Joseph’s ‘evil intent’ might be justified here, although the question of its original association with the figure of Joseph is in dispute. Hilgert (1985, 6-7), for instance, contends

that this sentence probably is the addition of a later writer who favored the tribe of Judah against that of Joseph. The phrase, writes Hilgert, occurs only in one other instance in the Hebrew Bible and generally is attributed to the Priestly sources (cf. *ibid.*, 6). In any case, Jacob's willingness to overlook – and even reward – this intent is reinforced in the sentence that follows in the narrative: “Now Yisra’el [Israel/Jacob] loved Yosef more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a coat with long sleeves” (Gen. 37: 3). While the narrative does not explicitly connect the report with Jacob's decision to bestow on Joseph this lavish gift, the immediate progression from Joseph's action to his father's gift, followed directly by the development of the brothers' hatred for Joseph (Gen. 37:4), provides at least the suggestion of causality.

The gift itself is significant, furthermore, not only due to its splendor, which clearly announces the special consideration that Jacob accords Joseph, but also in that it separates Joseph from his brothers in terms of possible privileges of class. Both the Koren and the Oxford translations refer to Joseph's coat as having “long sleeves,”⁷ rather than the conventional and otherwise evocative translation as a “coat of many colors.” While the latter may still apply, it is important to observe the significance of the distinction between the typical sleeveless tunic and the more decorative long-sleeved variety, which the Oxford edition notes would make it “impossible to undertake any manual labor while wearing it” (Metzger / Murphy, 48). This sense is reinforced on the occasion when Joseph is sold by his brothers into slavery. Joseph has been sent to “go [...] see whether it be well with thy brothers, and well with the flocks; and bring me word again” (Gen. 37:14). Here, the brothers are at work with the flocks, and Joseph, wearing the fine tunic he has been given, is sent to observe his brothers and report back. His function indeed is distinct from that of his brothers, and, in light of the evil report about which we were informed earlier, the present situation at least partially conveys the sense of Joseph as a spy on behalf of his father. For Joseph's brothers, this must have seemed a painfully blunt display of disloyalty on the part of their father, for Joseph clearly has been singled out and elevated above them. Even if we allow for the unlikely possibility that Joseph at seventeen (Gen. 37:2) is still considered too young to join his brothers at their physical task, the distinction of the coat, combined with their father's apparent mistrust of the older sons, effectively places Joseph in a separate class. That Joseph willingly accepts this form of distinction becomes manifestly clear as the story proceeds, culminating in the complex and contradictory trappings of his role as lord over Egypt under Pharaoh.

From the perspective of modern hermeneutics, the position that Joseph assumes within Egypt's system of social and political domination is extremely problematic. Even though Joseph ostensibly complies with Pharaoh's reign over Egypt in order to fulfill God's will by saving the people from starvation and by leading the people of Israel into Egypt, it is difficult to ignore the enormous degree to which Joseph benefits from this alliance with an oppressive regime. His family, likewise, ultimately moves from the brink of starvation to enjoying

“the best of the land, in the land of Ra’meses” (Gen. 47:11). The structure of Joseph’s relationship to Pharaoh, indeed, represents the most disturbing and ambiguous episode in Joseph’s circuitous series of experiences: In Joseph’s ascension to the role of “lord” (Gen. 42:30, 45:8-9) over Egypt, while apparently intended by the narrator to confirm Joseph’s triumph over adversity and his vindication by God, we find several prominent inconsistencies or contradictions in his actions, as well as in his statements concerning those actions.

This tension is particularly evident in the ambiguous role that Joseph performs as intermediary between Pharaoh and the people of Egypt. On the one hand, Joseph identifies a pressing need and responsibility that he feels compelled to address: the looming famine that will engulf the land following seven years of prosperity. Whether this sense of obligation stems from Joseph’s personal morality, his allegiance to the will of God, his response to the dictates of his dreams, or a general will toward self-preservation is not made entirely clear, although there certainly are intimations of his adherence to Divine Will, as he perceives it, in statements made later to his brothers: “for God did send me before you to preserve life” (Gen. 45:5). The identification of this motivation, of course, is crucial to our discussion in that it will reveal the extent to which Joseph overtly pursues Divine or humane interests as opposed merely to serving himself or the despotic intent of the Pharaoh.

Berel Dov Lerner, in her article “Joseph the Unrighteous” (1989, 279), argues that Joseph demonstrates repeatedly that he is motivated primarily by self-interest, and that that motivation prompts him to override considerations of morality, even when faced with the abject cries of the starving. In particular, she notes that Joseph’s original proposal to Pharaoh, planning for the storage of food in preparation for the famine, is altered when the famine actually arrives, in order to promote the usurpation of land and indentured servitude for the benefit of Pharaoh (*ibid.*). The original proposal, Lerner implies, adhered fundamentally to God’s purpose, whereas its replacement constituted a form of aggrandizement of Pharaoh and of Joseph himself. To this contention, Lerner adds the observation that the pleading of the hungry – “Give us bread: for why should we die in thy presence? (Gen. 47:15)” (Lerner 1989, 278) – hardly suggests that they are in the presence of a leader who can be expected to attend to their desperation. “These are not the words of a people benefitting from the care of a thoughtful ruler,” she writes (*ibid.*).

I find these arguments compelling in terms of their general critique of a system that is inherently stratified and relies on the enforcement of enslaved labor to maintain itself. The problem with Lerner’s contention is that, while claiming to ground itself in the authority of the biblical text, it essentially views the narrative out of its context – out of Joseph’s context. She suggests, for instance, that Joseph introduced widespread slavery to an Egypt that previously had not known slavery (*cf. ibid.*, 280), forgetting astonishingly that Joseph himself entered Egypt as a slave. She ultimately implies that Joseph is responsible for having initiated a system of fundamental injustice, neglecting to emphasize that Joseph spent thirteen years (Lowenthal 1973, 261) in an Egyptian prison for a

crime that the narrative implies never occurred. To her credit, Lerner elaborates the severity of the massive appropriation of Egyptian goods, then property, and finally personhood. What she fails to acknowledge is the skill – whether misdirected or not, remains open to discussion – by which Joseph mediates the demands of a despotic ruler and the immediate needs of the people of Egypt. Having prepared the nation for the famine, he is able to distribute food – at a severe cost, indeed, yet can we imagine him doing otherwise? It is inconceivable Pharaoh, a ruler who imprisoned his chief baker and chief butler because he was “offended” by them (Gen. 40:1), a despot who arbitrarily freed Joseph after so long an imprisonment when it was reported that he could interpret dreams, would have permitted the free distribution of food. Indeed, while Joseph certainly appears to possess considerable latitude in the implementation of his program, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that Joseph remained Pharaoh’s *subject*, rather than the “lord of all Mizrayim [Egypt]” (Gen. 45:9), about which he quite openly boasts in identifying himself to his brothers. Eric Lowenthal, for instance, explains at some length the reasons why Pharaoh permits Joseph to travel to Canaan in order to bury Jacob (Lowenthal 1973, 148-49). Among other considerations, Joseph must give his “assurance that he will ‘come back’” (ibid., 148).

Having suggested the limitations imposed upon Joseph’s independent agency, however, I feel it necessary to counter positions that overstate Joseph’s wisdom or beneficence in his administration of the famine relief. I think particularly of Lowenthal’s assertion, “As much as Joseph felt it his duty to help the poor population, he also intended to weaken the power of the rich” (ibid., 126). Lowenthal appears to base his notion on the supposition that, if (as in Gen. 47:16-17) individuals who approach Joseph in need of food possess livestock and other goods, the narrator must be referring to those who are not poor. While this seems a plausible assertion, it hardly mitigates the burden on the poor, who, in lieu of the livestock that they do not possess, must trade their freedom. Thus, the suggestion that Joseph intends to advance the needs of the poor over the demands of the rich appears to lack substance. In this sense, Lerner is right in alerting us to the questionable advantage garnered by the poor through Joseph’s system – a system of enslavement, she also notes, from which Joseph’s descendants will need to escape.

Where does this leave us with regard to the consideration of Joseph’s righteousness? Joseph clearly possesses characteristics that, by any definition, would be regarded as flawed, and these traits manifest themselves throughout the narrative, even after the reconciliation. Yet, despite the apparent persistence of malice and deception, the quality that distinguishes Joseph fundamentally from those with whom he comes into contact is his struggle to see beyond the point of crisis or conflict to a means of resolution. Nowhere is this orientation reflected more powerfully than in the reunion between Joseph and his brothers, as Joseph transcends the will to manipulate them and, in its place, recognizes their fraternity.

2.2 “And He Wept Aloud”: A Pattern Broken

The path toward this recognition, however, is indirect at best. Indeed, Meir Sternberg goes so far as to describe Joseph’s behavior as a form of “torment” (Sternberg 1985, 286), a fact that for him represents a literary puzzle considering that the narrative has foreshadowed the brothers’ reconciliation: If the dream foretells their reunion, “why does Joseph torment his brothers?” (ibid.). Sternberg asserts that this “gap of motive” (ibid.), because it is unexpected, becomes the natural object of our attention. This focus on Joseph’s possible emotional manipulation or even abuse, consequently, may prompt a less generous appraisal of his character.

The seeds of this uncertainty are suggested through the familiar biblical device of repetition. In this case, as Robert Alter notes, the narrator uses repetition as a way to frame our expectations concerning the story. We find, according to Alter (1981, 10, emphasis original),

the exact recurrence at the climax of Tamar’s story of the formula of recognition, *baker-na* and *vayaker*, used before with Jacob and his sons. The same verb, moreover, will play a crucial thematic role in the denouement of the Joseph story when he confronts his brothers in Egypt, he recognizing them, they failing to recognize him.[...] The first use of the formula was for an act of deception; the second use is for an act of unmasking. Judah with Tamar after Judah with his brothers is an exemplary narrative instance of the deceiver deceived, and since he was the one who proposed selling Joseph into slavery instead of killing him (Gen. 37:26-27), he can easily be thought of as the leader of the brothers in the deception practiced on their father. Now he becomes the surrogate in being subject to a bizarre but peculiarly fitting principle of retaliation, taken in by a piece of attire, as his father was.

Alter identifies the parallel use, in three instances, of the verb *נָכַר*, ‘to recognize’: When Jacob recognizes Joseph’s bloodied garment; when Tamar recognizes her father-in-law, Judah, who mistakes her for a prostitute; and when in Egypt Joseph recognizes his brothers without their recognizing him. More than merely connecting the scenes thematically and unifying the narrative as a whole, according to Alter, the repetition causes us to expect certain developments. While the first instance serves as a deception, and the second as a form of retaliation (cf. Lockwood 1992, 36), the third begins with a deception and promises retaliation as Joseph begins to torment his brothers. This expectation is reinforced by the apparent similarity between Tamar and Joseph in terms of their victimization by Judah and their attempts to conceal their identities in order, it would seem, to bring about their respective retaliations. Through the seeming repetition of Tamar’s opportunity, we are primed for Joseph to act.⁸

The tension created by our growing anticipation of Joseph’s revenge is heightened further by Joseph’s decision to accuse his brothers of being spies, for which Sternberg (1985, 288) provides an intriguing explanation: “[I]he charge of spying harks back to childhood, when the young Joseph endeared himself to his brothers by bearing tales about them to Jacob; and, need I say, the present inversion of the roles of spy vs. victim betrays a sense of guilt that only adds fuel to the psyche’s flames.” In addition, and more pertinent to our present focus,

Joseph attains through “the rawness of his spontaneous emotion” (*ibid.*, 289) the potential for vindictive, even overtly violent action.

Having identified our inherent reluctance as readers to expect a reconciliation, it seems plausible to suggest that for Joseph, as well as for us, the break in the pattern of recognition and rejection – as well as in the pressure exerted over time by the guilt that the brothers must have felt (cf. Gen. 42:21) – comes unexpectedly, causing him to break emotionally in a collapse of human will. As Judah, still unaware that this high official is his brother Joseph, relates his father’s fear of losing a second son (Benjamin), Joseph is no longer able to suppress his emotions: “Then Yosef could not restrain himself before all them that stood by him; and he cried, Cause every man to go out from me. And no man stood with him, while Yosef made himself known to his brethren. And he wept aloud; and Mizrayim [Egypt] and the house of Par’o [Pharaoh] heard” (Gen. 45: 1-2). Rather than continuing the explication of motive and appearances that has characterized the narrative to this point, the narrator thus motivates our acceptance of the denouement through the heightening of pathos: Out of the tension created by our anticipation of Joseph’s vengeance, the relief we experience in the thwarting of this expectation is given full expression in the unrestrained way in which Joseph weeps after his revelation.

2.3 A Hermeneutic of Repentance

As I have indicated, the Joseph story produces a number of forms in which conflict and violence – both overt and covert – appear: On the one hand, we find it in the expressions of jealousy, familial hierarchy, betrayal, and deception; on the other, enslavement, class privilege, wealth in the midst of famine/starvation, and economic exploitation. While, clearly, the first group pertains more to the interpersonal dimension and the second to a more distinctly socio-political sphere, what all of the forms of violence share is their separation or distinction of an individual or group of individuals from others, and always in ways that diminish the integrity or self-worth of those involved. In Joseph’s case, whether he functions as subject or object, as victimizer or victim, he remains separate and dysfunctional until the moment that his deception and will to manipulate collapse. In this sense, according to Hugh C. White (1991, 269), Joseph, “after his fall from the egoistic heights of his privileged position in the family, is a largely fixed, passive character, driven by circumstance, who is made successful by the unseen presence of the divine.” Yet, while White contends that Joseph’s “consciousness,” by the time that he has assumed power over Egypt, “is virtually assimilated into that of God” (*ibid.*, 270),⁹ we have seen ample evidence to suggest that Joseph remains adrift, spiritually, until the moment of his reconciliation. Driven by a predetermined destiny, he nevertheless acts in that moment of encounter out of the fullness of his experience and being, out of deep flaws in his

character as well as the yearning for fraternal and divine reconciliation that progressively animates his awareness.

Indeed, Joseph is most clearly himself in that moment when, having overcome this separation from himself and from others, he facilitates their repentance. This sense of ‘returning’ to oneself and to God is inherent to the Jewish conception of repentance, as Ehud Luz points out:

The Hebrew word for repentance, *teshuvah*, has two distinct meanings. The first derives from the verb “to return”; when used in this sense, it signifies going back to one’s point of origin, returning to the straight path, coming back home after a period of absence. The second derives from the verb “to reply,” and denotes response to a question or call that has come from without. The Jewish idea of *teshuvah* embraces both these meanings: It is a movement of return to one’s source, to the original paradigm of human – or national – life, and also, simultaneously, a response to a divine call. The act of returning to one’s original self is thus in and of itself a return to God and his teaching; and this is true on both the individual and the national levels. (Luz 1987, 785)

In this moment in which his childhood dream-vision is fulfilled, Joseph’s personal and divine destinies meet. Joseph’s “original self,” then, is the self that had the insight to prophesy his ascension, that implicitly saw itself as one to be exalted by God; yet, it has taken the mildest and most humble of outpourings from the heart to bring that self – for so long bent on self-absorption and even self-promotion – to its highest level of expression. In this respect, the connection between repentance-as-return and *catharsis* can be seen most clearly. As Anne-Grethe Talseth and Fredricka Gilje (2007, 634), in another context, point out,

[t]he response of unburdening grief suggests catharsis. Originally proposed by Aristotle and applied to the emotional purgative effect of Greek tragedies, the intent of ‘catharsis’ was to purge, purify and morally re-educate those who watched the tragedies. Thus, catharsis seems similar to a kind of ‘homecoming’; that is, the soul coming home to itself.¹⁰

For readers observing the “homecoming” that Joseph undergoes, I suggest, the experience of *catharsis* in this critical moment is brought about by what Hans Robert Jauss (1974, 288) calls an “aesthetic identification”: By entwining readers’ lives with those of the characters, the narrative “sets the spectator free in such a way that his emotion, in identification with the hero, can flare up more spontaneously, and consume itself more completely than in the context of everyday life.” Through their spontaneous emotional identification with the protagonist of the biblical story of Joseph, readers find an outlet for their desire for reconciliation.

3. Beyond Scripture: The Joseph Story in the Post-Biblical Imagination

The sparse and suggestive qualities of biblical narratives have prompted succeeding generations to elaborate and embellish upon them in ways that reflect their own concerns and desires and needs, and to shape that essence into forms that the people of their own generations can understand and appreciate. The story of

Cain and Abel (Gen. 4: 1-26) is a particularly instructive example of this tendency. As noted earlier, the narrative is comprised of only 26 verses, during which we learn that Adam and Eve conceived and gave birth to them (4:1-2); that Abel was a shepherd and Cain a farmer (4:2); that both had presented offerings to God, but that Abel's was accepted and Cain's rejected (4:3-5); that Cain, apparently jealous of Abel's acceptance by God (4:5), kills his brother (4:8); that God, realizing that Abel is missing, asks Cain about his whereabouts (4:9), to which Cain replies, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (4:9); that God, by hearing the cry of Abel's blood, implicitly accuses Cain of Abel's murder (4:10); that God banishes Cain from the land (4:11-12); that God (4:15) sets a mark upon Cain (the so-called 'mark of Cain'); that Cain went to live "east of Eden," away from his parents (4:16); that Cain married and had children (4:17-22); that these children produced several generations of children (4:18, 4:20-21); that Adam and Eve eventually had another son, in compensation for the loss of Abel (4:25), and this son also had a son (4:26); and that the generation of the grandson of Adam and Eve began to worship God (4:26).

There is a tremendous amount of detail packed into these 26 verses; yet, for all that is contained in this narrative, the very brevity of the telling requires that elements upon which readers rely for their understanding and interpretation necessarily have been left out. Why, for instance, is Cain jealous of Abel's acceptance by God? What type of person is Cain that would prompt him to strike against his brother without forewarning? (Or did the brothers have a history of antagonism?) Why does God banish Cain but offer to protect him by marking him? Is the mark that is put on Cain meant to protect him, or to identify him in the event that someone kills him? These are only a fraction of the many questions raised by this narrative, due to its highly compressed story time, absence of motivation for particular actions, and general lack of detail. It is hardly surprising, then, that subsequent generations, faced with the challenges presented by this and many other biblical narratives, might seek to answer these questions, or to amplify the details that are missing, or to provide meanings that simply cannot be gleaned objectively from a close reading of the original text. For example, surpassing in detail the many other amplifications and interpretations of the narrative over the centuries, John Steinbeck wrote an entire novel, *East of Eden*, which allegorically follows – and builds on – the story of Cain and Abel.

Although the story of Joseph is significantly more developed and detailed than many other biblical narratives, it is still sufficiently indeterminate and ambiguous in many respects. Joseph, as I have suggested, is neither wholly 'good' nor truly 'bad,' but the ambiguity of his path toward reconciliation with his brothers and with God certainly requires of the reader a considerable degree of "gap-filling" (Boyarin 1990, 41) to make sense of the text. According to Daniel Boyarin,

[t]he gaps are those silences in the text which call for interpretation if the reader is to "make sense" of what happened, to fill out the plot and characters in a meaningful way. This is precisely what midrash does by means of its explicit narrative expansions.^[1] I am extending the application of the term "gap" here to mean any element in the textual system of the Bible which demands interpretation for a

coherent construction of the story, that is, both gaps in the narrow sense, as well as contradictions and repetitions, which indicate to the reader that she must fill in something that is not given in the text in order to read it. (ibid.).

When such gap-filling takes the form of an expansion or imaginative retelling of a biblical story, Jewish scholars and theologians have often applied the term *midrash* or, more narrowly, *aggada*, which is derived from the Hebrew term “*le-haggid*, to tell” (Hartman and Budick 1986, 363). Of the function and sensibility that typically inhabit such material, Isaak Heinemann (cited in Boyarin 1990, 9) provides a definition that, in important respects, closely applies to my own sense of how we are called to relate to or identify with the story and its characters:

[...]the aggada, and not only the aggada of the Jewish people, fills in the details [of the historical record] in an imaginative way, in order to find an answer to the questions of the listeners and to arrive at a depiction which will act on their feelings.

Thus, one function of “aggadic midrash” (ibid., 1), Heinemann suggests, is to infuse that original content with a sensibility that can be understood by one’s “listeners.” In other words, beyond the immediate concerns for the apprehension of meaning is the equally significant – indeed, concomitant – task of relating that meaning to a new generation of readers. The fact that the products of this endeavor frequently diverge quite widely from each other and from the source material upon which they purportedly are based suggests the impossibility of settling on any one ‘correct’ interpretation. It is perhaps for this reason, as well as the demands of particular audiences, that the expansions of biblical narratives can vary widely.¹²

In this section, I again take up the question of Joseph’s moral character and stance through the consideration of two narratives that, by attempting to fill the gaps that the biblical narrative leaves to our imaginations, derive distinctly different conclusions about the protagonist’s thoughts, feelings and motives – and, as a result, lack the dimension of *catharsis* described above. I will begin with a discussion of what I consider, of the two, the more radical departure from the tone of the Bible’s presentation of the reconciliation, in the medieval narrative *The Book of Yasbar*.¹³

3.1 A Show of Strength

There is some disagreement among scholars regarding the origins of *The Book of Yasbar*. Moshe Lazar, for instance, suggests that it was produced in Spain sometime prior to 1550 (Lazar 1989, xviii); James Kugel (1990, 31), on the other hand, argues that it was probably written “no earlier than the thirteenth century” in Italy. In any case, the relative moral weakness and seeming cowardice of Joseph in this narrative provides a striking contrast with the more nuanced and ambiguous features of the biblical character.

The primary factor that distinguishes the story of Joseph in this text from the biblical prototype is its unabashed effort to restore, even elevate, the status of

Judah in comparison with the brother he has wronged. It is an interesting subversion of our expectation, for instance, when we read in the account of the events leading up to the brothers' reconciliation that "Joseph sought a pretext to make himself known unto his brethren, lest they should destroy all Egypt" (Lazar 1989, 239). Since the biblical narrative provides no suggestion that Joseph in any way fears his brothers, *The Book of Yasbar* jolts readers, in a sense, from their possible complacency with regard to the interpretation of the original. Indeed, considering the fact that Judah in *The Book of Yasbar* clearly lacks the repentant tone that we witness in the Bible, and even seems to assert his own moral superiority, the text begs readers to investigate the presumption of Joseph's moral integrity.

The text effectively raises these doubts by weaving, as in other narrative expansions, interpretive embellishment around fragments of text, themes, and enigmatic aspects from the biblical account. At times, these embellishments serve to draw out the inherent implications of the biblical text. More often, though, the narrative presents actions, situations and characters in ways that, while narratively plausible if we were to approach the text as an unfamiliar story, perhaps exaggerate or even lead us away from the underlying sensibility that informs the biblical story.¹⁴ One early and significant example of this practice occurs in the descriptions of Joseph in the passages leading up to his fateful journey to Dothan. As noted earlier, we know (from Genesis 37:4) that Jacob favors Joseph over his brothers, and there is even the suggestion that Joseph was exempted from physical labor as a result of this favoritism. We also know that the brothers hate him for the attention Joseph receives from his father, "and they hated him yet the more for his dreams" (Gen. 37:8), in which his dominion over them is foretold. Finally, the implication that Joseph spies on and maligns his brothers through his evil report (cf. Gen. 37:2) certainly suggests that young Joseph's intentions are not wholly innocent or benevolent. Yet, what seems startling in the account of these facts contributing to the brothers' decision to sell Joseph is the heightened emphasis in *The Book of Yasbar* on Joseph's desire to elevate himself at the expense of his brothers. Rather than a case of destiny, in terms of his dreams, or the mere outcome of his relationship with his father, in this text Joseph clearly seeks promotion, as in the following passage in which the narrative imposes a striking exegetical stance on the question of Joseph's evil report:

And when Joseph saw that his father loved him more than his brethren, he continued to exalt himself above his brethren, and he brought unto his father evil reports concerning them. (Lazar 1989, 247)

This represents an interesting rearrangement of the biblical text, which never states that Joseph "saw that their father loved him more," but that the brothers saw this and therefore hated Joseph. More importantly, the biblical description occurs in Genesis 37:4, following the reference to a single evil report and the gift of the coat. The passage in *The Book of Yasbar*, on the other hand, makes the evil reports – now more than one – a consequence of Joseph's realization, and transforms it into the predominant mindset upon which his actions are based.

This position might have been tenable as an exegetical conclusion had the narrative settled for the magnification of this possible dimension of Joseph's character within the specific context of the evil reports and their possibly close relation to their father's favoritism. The narrative undermines its position from an exegetical standpoint, however, by reiterating at least twice in the same paragraph Joseph's desire to "magnify" or "raise" (ibid.) himself above his brothers. Clearly, the narrative seeks to make the brothers' eventual crime more understandable – even acceptable – a fact that will help explain the strange events leading toward reconciliation that I will address later.

The narrative begins to promote the exegetical parameters upon which its version of the reconciliation is based in the scene in which Judah argues against his brothers' intention to kill Joseph. By adding to the biblical language – "What gain will it be to us if we slay our brother?"¹⁵ – an invented statement, "Peradventure God will require him from us" (Lazar 1989, 251), the narrative infuses Judah's intent with an element of moral reflection, and simultaneously defuses the apparent profit motive ("gain") that at least seems a plausible interpretation of the biblical text.

Indeed, while I am not suggesting that the text ever overtly indicates that the brothers' sale of Joseph is morally acceptable, it does allude to such a possibility when it asserts, in its expansion of the brothers' consultation on Joseph's fate, that God implicitly accepts this outcome as a way of circumventing Joseph's murder. After the Midianites request the purchase of Joseph, saying, "therefore sell him unto us, and we will give you all that you require for him" (ibid., 253), we encounter the startling statement: "[...] and the Lord was pleased to do this in order that the sons of Jacob should not slay their brother" (ibid.). The implication, of course, is that God condones ("was pleased"), and therefore readily implements ("to do this"), the sale of Joseph – as though He is able to discourage the brothers' violent intentions only by allowing this deed to take place.

It is hard to discern, from the two passages cited above, whether God actually intends for Joseph to be sold, but the question – particularly in terms of the motive behind that intention, as well as the brothers' apprehension of that intention – assumes great importance as we consider the reconciliation that occurs later. In the Bible, for instance, Joseph tells his brothers that "God did send me before you to preserve life" (Gen. 45:5), suggesting that God intended that Joseph be sold as a means to a specific end. Yet, despite the fact that this statement in a sense relieves the brothers of their guilt, the immorality of their deed seems to remain unquestioned, and they only learn of this intention many years after the deed was done. In fact, as suggested earlier, it is only Joseph's awareness of God's purpose, as well as the clear expression of repentance on the part of his brothers, that enables Joseph to transcend his own internal division by turning, through his act of forgiveness, toward his brothers and toward God.

None of this is self-evident, however, in the treatment of this reconciliation in *The Book of Yashar*. Whereas Judah in the Bible begs Joseph to release Benjamin, Judah in *The Book of Yashar* lacks any humility or show of remorse – indeed, threatens Joseph if he fails to free his brother. And whereas, even as the biblical

Joseph torments and tests his brothers, he remains the clear moral superior due to the egregiousness of the act that has been perpetrated against him, the Joseph of *The Book of Yashar* appears, in these crucial scenes, timid and cowardly in the face of his more physically (and morally?) imposing brothers. In fact, Joseph himself sets up this tension by concocting a test of a more overt sort than that which we find in the Bible: In a private moment with Benjamin, Joseph reveals himself to his brother and tells him:

[...] behold I will send thee with them when they go back again into the city, and I will take thee away from them. And if they dare their lives and fight for thee, then shall I know that they have repented of what they did unto me, and I will make myself known to them [...]. (Lazar 1989, 327)

Joseph, indeed, makes of that *will to fight* the evidence by which he will know his brothers' hearts: Whereas meekness and humility are called for in the biblical narrative, here the extent of the bluster is seen as absolute proof.

Thus, as Joseph repeatedly goads Judah with the knowledge of the way in which the brothers sold him into slavery, Judah becomes increasingly angry – so much so, in fact, that despite passing Joseph's test of loyalty to Benjamin, Judah nevertheless fails to concede his own wrongdoing. To be sure, there are assertions earlier in the narrative to the effect that the brothers regret and 'repent of what they have done: "And when the sons of Jacob had sold their brother Joseph to the Midianites, their hearts were smitten on account of him, and they repented of their acts, and they sought for him to bring him back, but could not find him" (ibid., 259). Yet, in the decisive reconciliation scene, which in the biblical account elicits a sense of pathos (Gen. 44: 14-16), we find Judah at his most strident – indeed, unrepentant, in terms of any conventional sense of the notion. When Joseph, in a particularly cruel twist, offers to release Benjamin if the brothers can produce Joseph instead, we read:

And Judah's anger was kindled against Joseph when he spoke this thing, and his eyes dropped blood with anger, and he said unto his brethren: 'How doth this man this day seek his own destruction and that of all Egypt?' (Lazar 1989, 339).

Even if we consider the possibility that Judah, still unaware of Joseph's identity, shows remorse for his past behavior by defending Joseph's full brother, Benjamin, we still must make sense of the radical differences between the two versions of the story.

It would appear, therefore, that we must look more deeply into the culture that produced that narrative to arrive at some understanding of this apparent subversion of the biblical intent. "Interpreting an interpretation," writes Maren Niehoff,

means to unravel the complex inter-relationship between the authority of the text and the thought-world of the interpreter. Primarily, the exegete's choice of key-passages on which he will base his interpretation requires explanation. Subsequently, the exegesis of each biblical item needs to be analysed also in the context of the interpreter's general views. Proceeding in this fashion, it is possible to shed light on the way in which each reading – or should I say each "meaning"? – of the text is generated by the specific concerns of the exegete. Conversely, the function of the biblical figure of Joseph in different Jewish contexts will emerge. (Niehoff 1992, 7)

I have identified the way in which *The Book of Yashar* appropriates “key-passages” in order to promote particular exegetical objectives. While a more detailed investigation of “the specific concerns of the exegete” or of the particular “Jewish context” in which he or she wrote is beyond the scope of this essay, some further observations on what might have motivated the (for us) enigmatic characterization of Judah, among others, seem warranted.

In the case of *The Book of Yashar*, we must consider the possibility that, beyond any exegetical motive, the author wished to heighten qualities of heroism and dramatic action that, while certainly expanding well beyond the implicit meaning of the biblical text – indeed, even distorting it – nevertheless fulfilled a particular function and expectation on the part of readers at the time. Moshe Lazar (1989, xiii-xix) has suggested, for instance, that *The Book of Yashar*, in drawing material from the earlier *Book of Yosippon*, may have sought to emulate the latter’s treatment of the Maccabean conflict in establishing the tone and content for its own scenes involving conflict. This assertion would appear to coincide with the apparent “popularity of Jewish adaptations of chivalric romances” (ibid., xv) at the time when the text was written. This may be particularly true of a certain heroic model based on Arthurian-type gallantry, on which some secular Jewish texts of the Middle Ages appear to have been based.

Of course, it is equally likely that, in combination with a concession to this particular literary climate, the author sought to depict Judah in a way consistent with other midrashic texts that preceded it. As I will have occasion to elaborate later, Niehoff, in making this point, in fact implicitly notes the shift of the climax in the story from the internal tension experienced by Joseph to the tension created by the overt confrontation between the brothers:

This altercation between Judah and Joseph just before the latter discloses his identity constitutes in a way the climax of the whole Joseph story. For targumic and midrashic interpreters this passage [Gen. 44:18ff] was significant and numerous versions of it exist. Based on the expression “you are like Pharaoh,” they add a highly aggressive tone of the biblical speech of Judah. Most of these interpretations focus on Judah and his threats to destroy Egypt and its population, including Joseph and Pharaoh. (Niehoff 1992, 160)

In comparing *The Book of Yashar* with midrashic texts, Niehoff finds “numerous” instances of textual similarity. Whether these similarities represent an effort at maintaining a particular religious-literary tradition, in light of the preeminence of the Tribe of Judah in Judaic tradition, or are intended more specifically to advance a traditional exegetical stance, remains in question.

For instance, Richard G. Marks, in his “Dangerous Hero: Rabbinic Attitudes Toward Legendary Warriors,” implies that these interpretations in a sense fuse the chivalric with the exegetical in a stance that both lauds the strength of the warrior while seeking to distinguish between appropriate and excessive uses of force. These figures, known in rabbinic literature as *gibborim*, represent “a type of hero” (Marks 1983, 183) who, unlike the Maccabees, are seen to possess “superhuman strength” (ibid.). Marks contends that the portrayal of these figures is intended to serve both as inspiration and caution, for, “[r]efusing to

acknowledge its [their strength's] transcendent source, they could use it in a sinful and arrogant manner, causing needless bloodshed and endangering the nation" (ibid., 188). In this sense, referring to the traditional midrash *Genesis Rabbah* (93:6), he writes: "When Menasseh stamps his foot upon the floor so hard that the entire palace shakes, Judah cries out, 'Such a stamp could only come from my father's house!' Listeners, themselves descended from the House of Jacob, are intended to feel proud at seeing what strong warriors their fathers were" (ibid., 184).

In terms of rabbinic portrayals of the meeting between Joseph and Judah, Marks apparently sees the rabbis as vindicating the righteousness of Judah's show of strength, at least insofar as it reflects his desire to free Benjamin (ibid., 185). It is important to note, moreover, that while Joseph in some of the texts is "not to be outdone" by his brothers' strength (ibid., 182) – some "rabbinic texts connected Joseph's strength with God" (ibid., 185) – in *The Book of Yashar* Joseph is understood to fear Judah. In this sense, Joseph's weakness serves to emphasize his moral inferiority.

In any event, whether *The Book of Yashar* emphasizes the heroism and strength of Judah for the sake of entertainment, for the purpose of stimulating morale, or in order to maintain tradition, it seems clear that there was less interest in elaborating, exegetically, tendencies inherent to the biblical text.¹⁶ While my intention here certainly is not to condemn the medieval text for its imaginative liberties, I do believe the issue is important in that it raises the question of the text's capacity to inform our understanding of the biblical sense of Joseph's character, and of the particular type of reconciliation that he forges, in that account, with his brothers. Indeed, insofar as *The Book of Yashar* advances notions of Joseph's weakness and self-promotion beside Judah's strength – both physically and, perhaps, morally – we must consider this text a radical reworking of the biblical narrative. We might conclude, in fact, that the text loses that potency to the extent that it distances itself from the moral and emotional urgency of the biblical paradigm.

3.2 The Incitement to Perfection

As is the case with *The Book of Yashar*, the exact authorship and date of composition for the *Testaments* is uncertain. H. C. Kee places its composition somewhere between 250 and 107 BCE (Kee 1983, 777-78). Gordon Zerbe arrives at a similar time frame, based "on the assumption that the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* (1) is probably a Jewish work with Christian redactions and interpolations, (2) is based on Semitic antecedents which reach back to c. 200-175 BCE and (3) emerged in a form generally similar to that which is now extant c. 100-63 BCE" (Zerbe 1993, 137-38).

Whatever their time and place of origin, the *Testaments*, though nominally framed as deathbed confessions, are essentially homiletic in intent and structure.

Consequently, much of what we consider the basic story of Joseph and his brothers often is referred to only tangentially, and then, usually, for the purpose of elaborating a particular moral outlook or admonition. Ironically, it is the intimacy and personality of the testaments themselves, the way in which they indeed function as narratives, that in a sense lend the homiletic stance its authority; therefore, before proceeding with an investigation of the specific messages advanced by several of these texts, some considerations on their narrativity – in other words, the degree to which they conform to what we might call narratives¹⁷ – will help to frame our discussion. I will emphasize here three principal features of the *Testaments* that contribute to their reception as narratives: (1) the use of a “character narrator” (Phelan 2005) that figures in the events that he describes, (2) the presence of what Phelan (2007, 4) calls “a doubled communicative situation,” and (3) the recounting of events that have occurred in the past, in this case accentuated by the testamental form in which the narratives appear.

The use of character narrators is the feature that most clearly distinguishes the *Testaments* from *The Book of Yashar*. Indeed, the testaments operate consciously as personal memoirs: Each narrative is told by one of the twelve brothers, who recounts his own life by looking back, as it were, and consciously imposing a moral outlook on the events that have transpired. This is in marked contrast to *The Book of Yashar*, in which the identity of the narrator is entirely obscured. Thus, in that work, there is no indication whether the impersonal, extradiegetic narrator has witnessed the events that are narrated, has received an account from others, or simply has omniscient access to the events in question.

The memoir-like form of the testaments, moreover, tends to highlight their inherently rhetorical nature. Phelan’s (2007, 7) rhetorical definition of narrative seems particularly apt here: “somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose that something happened.” The tellers, of course, are the brothers, who, on the occasions of their approaching deaths seek to recount the events of their lives and convey the wisdom that they have gained from those events to others. This primary communication is doubled, according to Phelan (*ibid.*, 4), in that (1) there is assumed to be “more than one teller” (the author, as distinct from the character narrator), who (2) possesses another “purpose” (presumably the homiletic instruction mentioned earlier), (3) delivered to an “audience” that is distinct from the deathbed listeners implied by the narrative itself.

Of course, our awareness of this double communicative situation serves to remind us that the device of invoking the perspective of memory in the *Testaments* merely provides the illusion of authenticity, which, due to our relative faith in memoir and first-hand accounts, tends to lend the narratives the impression of credibility. James E. Young, in his endeavor to explore (as the title of his book suggests) “the consequences of interpretation” as they pertain to the narration of the Holocaust, explains how testaments come to possess their authoritative power:

In moving from the legendary realm of Genesis to the historical world of Exodus, for example, the biblical scribes seemed to devote considerable effort to reinforcing the testamentary – i.e., eyewitness – authority of their narrative. Indeed, even though the Pentateuch invokes the highest possible authority for its “truth” (what

better author than God, or more faithful scribe than Moses?) we find in the text repeated attempts to establish an eyewitness link between events and their scriptural representations. [...] [T]he scribes of the Pentateuch seem already to have been experimenting with rhetorical and literary strategies for reinforcing their text's historical authority. (Young 1988, 20)

Thus, a testament that is perceived to possess historical authority, that bases its authenticity on a certain level of “factual insistence” (ibid., 15), tends to be believed.

As ‘an instrument of events,’ the scribe is in this view a neutral medium through which events would write themselves. And as part of the events he records, the scribe seems to endow his testimony with an ontological authority that verifies both the authenticity and – by extension – the facticity of his record (ibid., 21).

This “ontological authority” stems, I believe, from the emotional weight that often attends the personal involvement of the narrator. As an eyewitness, the narrator lends his description of events an inherent element of personality, even intimacy, that generally would be impossible in a conventional third-person narrative. Thus, passages that invoke pathos and evoke sympathetic identification, in the sense of the *catharsis* described earlier, tend to be heightened through our admission into the mental and emotional universe of the characters. Depending upon the reliability of the narrators through their fidelity to the truth of the experiences being described – or, conversely, depending upon their skill in convincing us of that fidelity – a more intuitive sense of identification between teller and listener, between text and reader, can perhaps take place.

The extent of this identification is limited, however, by the relative inability of this form of narrative – lacking frequently the elements of the story itself¹⁸ – to draw us, through a sustained engagement with events in a narrated sequence, into a concentrated identification with the characters. In this sense, those testaments that most effectively weave homily and story – particularly elements of story drawn directly from the biblical narrative – tend to promote the highest degree of identification and, hence, often possess the greatest homiletic authority.

Perhaps these considerations can be brought into clearer relief by looking, first, at “The Testament of Judah,” which in many respects serves to highlight some of the distinctions between the *Testaments* and *The Book of Yashar*. Indeed, in light of the centrality of Judah's moral outrage and bravery to the climax of *The Book of Yashar*, it is interesting to contrast the treatment of Judah's character in that text with the way in which these features are addressed in the *Testaments*. As in *The Book of Yashar*, the narrator of “The Testament of Judah” initially defines his life in terms of his physical prowess and the battles that he has waged. He recounts, for instance, how

[...]
I slew a lion
and snatched a kid out of its mouth.
I took a bear by its paw
and rolled it away into a pit,
and every beast, when it turned upon me, I rent it like a dog.
(Testament of Judah 2:3-5, in Hollander / de Jonge 1985, 187-88)¹⁹

The emphasis on physical strength, along with the catalogue of military conquests and battlefield killings in other early passages of this testament, certainly

is reminiscent of the tone in *The Book of Yashar*, and we might consider them to possess a decisive thematic affinity were it not for the chapters that follow. In chapter 13, for instance, Judah tells his children:

And now, whatever I command you,
listen, children, to your father,
and keep all my words,
to perform the ordinances of the Lord
and to obey the commandment of the Lord God.
And do not walk after your lusts,
nor in the devices of your dispositions, in the
arrogance of your heart;
and do not boast of the deeds of the strength of your youth,
for this also is evil in the eyes of the Lord. (ibid. 13:1-2; 206)

In effect, Judah here renounces the type of glorified physicality implicit in *The Book of Yashar*. By linking humility concerning “the deeds of the strength of your youth” with the obligation “to perform the ordinances of the Lord,” he directs his children’s attention to a quite different calling. In fact, we find that much of the second half of Judah’s testament urges abstinence from worldly pleasures – particularly, “to love money” and “to gaze upon the beauty of women” (ibid. 17:1; 214), neither of which should surprise us considering Judah’s ill luck with both in the Bible.

His further admonitions against arrogance (cf. ibid. 18:3; 215) and his advocacy for repentance – “And when you turn to the Lord with perfect heart, / repenting and walking in all the commandments of God [...]” (ibid. 23:5; 225) – suggests that something quite different from a conventional retelling of the biblical narrative is at work here. In a sense, the text credits him with the acquisition or accumulation of wisdom over time, which he is seen to apply here, in retrospect. In the Joseph story as it is told in *The Book of Yashar*, conversely, we encounter Judah within the broader frame of narrated time. Less time is spent, therefore, in relating this later, more mature period of his life that forms the vantage point for Judah’s testament. Despite the demonstration in T. Judah of Judah’s more mature sensibility, however, glaringly absent from this narrator’s testament is any reference to his role in the sale of Joseph – an omission that is made yet more apparent by the fact that Joseph and his ordeal figure so prominently in other testaments. By implication, of course, Judah’s promotion of humility and repentance naturally leads us to assume that he would apply that awareness to the sin he has perpetrated against his brother; still, his failure to mention the episode leaves us perplexed, and needing to search elsewhere for the *Testaments’* collective view of the reconciliation between the brothers. Before we can apprehend the way that these parts comprise a whole representing a fairly unified homiletic stance on the question of the reconciliation, however, I wish first to look at the alternative ways in which the event is given shape and meaning through the perspectives of several of the brothers, as each reflects on shared or similar events.

It is hardly surprising that, aside from the testaments of Joseph and Benjamin, the testaments containing the most expansive material concerning the relationships of the brothers to Joseph belong to those characters who typically receive

‘midrashic’ attention: The authors of biblical expansions frequently give voice or expression to characters who, in the biblical story, either figure prominently yet whose motives are unclear, or those who are entirely marginal, who perhaps appear only as part of a larger group or are referred to only in passing. In this sense, Jacob’s second son, Simeon, represents an illuminating example of the former type, in that the reasons for which Joseph selects him from among the brothers to be a hostage are not specified by the biblical text (cf. Sternberg 1985, 291, 293). It is of considerable interest, then, to find in “The Testament of Simeon” a clear description of his motivation for mistreating Joseph: “And at that time I was jealous of Joseph, / because our father loved him; / and I set my liver against him to kill him [...]” (T. Simeon 1:6-7; 111). Aside from the admission of the desire to murder Joseph, there is little that is unfamiliar here; however, it is the statement that concludes this passage, which allows us to enter into Simeon’s repentant state of mind, that will characterize his testament: “...because the prince of deceit sent the spirit of jealousy / and blinded my mind / so that I did not regard him as a brother / and did not spare Jacob my father” (ibid. 2:7; 111). As in other testaments, the witness announces at the outset the theme – generally, some sort of failing or weakness – that has dominated his life, and that his testament as a whole will seek to address: For Simeon, “the spirit of jealousy” and envy have challenged his soul and prevented him from feeling love for his brother.

Simeon’s deliverance, both from the sin that divides him from God and from the guilt for the action that resulted from that division, demonstrates the tendency in the *Testaments* to relate the process of returning to God to the nature of the sin itself:

If a man flees to the Lord,
the evil spirit runs away from him
and his mind becomes light;
and from then onwards he sympathises with him who is envied
and he does not condemn those who love him
and so he ceases from (his) envy.

And, then, he supplies the corollary to his mode of repentance:

Do you, therefore, my beloved children, also love each one his
brother, with a good heart
and put away from you the spirit of envy.
For this makes savage the soul...
(ibid. 3:5-8; 114)

Through these passages, Simeon invites readers to envision his despair, to know his fear of God, to experience his liberation in that Presence, and to reinstate for himself and to assert for his children the obligation to love one’s brother.

This sentiment is reinforced, by contrast, by the brother Gad’s admission in his testament of his burning hatred for Joseph. This hatred, we learn, stems from the information concerning Gad that Joseph provides his father. We learn that, from Gad’s perspective, Joseph “rebuked us to our faces” about their having “snatched a lamb out of the mouth of the bear” and then having “put the bear to death” (T. Gad 1:6-7, 9; 321), among other deeds. This example of gap-filling elaborates on the evil report attributed to Joseph. Yet, it provides more than

mere detail to the Bible's abstract suggestion of a report: Gad also claims that Joseph actually misreported or even fabricated the information transmitted to his father. Thus, Gad feels himself justifiably hateful, to the extent that "the spirit of hatred was in me" (ibid. 1:9; 321). Gad further admits to having "very often...wanted to kill him" (ibid. 2:1; 321), after which admission he provides the missing testimony regarding Judah's role in the plot against Joseph, as well as information that might suggest that Gad is a less-than-reliable witness:

Therefore, I and Judah sold him to the Ishmaelites for thirty pieces of gold,
and hiding the ten, we shared the twenty to our brothers.
And thus through covetousness I was fully bent on slaying him.
(ibid. 2:3-4; 321)

Judah, here, is placed at the scene, but Gad, revealing their deceit toward the other brothers, prompts us to wonder about both Gad's and Judah's reliability as narrators, even in retrospect.

These factors – the extent of Gad's sense of having been wronged, the severity of the wrong that he perpetrates, and the general sense of deceit that perhaps underlies the recounting of either or both – render his later words to his children particularly startling: "Hatred is evil, / for it constantly persists in lying, / speaking against truth [...]" (ibid. 5:1; 325). By connecting the notions of hatred and untruth, indeed, Gad positions himself in opposition to the ways of his past, and the path that has led him to this new understanding is, not surprisingly, an understanding of the command to love (ibid. 4:1-2; 324). The primary obstacle to love, for Gad, is hatred, which he depicts here almost as an autonomous entity, one that "works" (ibid. 4:1, 4:5, 4:7; 324) and "does not want to hear" (ibid. 4:2; 324). Having come to realize the profoundly destructive capacity of this force in his life, he finds in love a way back from the abyss, and even advances a rather comprehensive ethic of forgiveness (cited here only in part):

Therefore, love one another from the heart,
and if a man sins against you,
speak to him in peace,
after having cast away the poison of hatred;
and do not hold guile in your soul.
And if he confesses and repents,
forgive him...
(ibid. 6:3-4; 331)

It is perhaps no coincidence that Gad articulates a vision of forgiveness that somewhat closely parallels, or at least is highly reminiscent of, Joseph's act of forgiveness in the Bible. We can only speculate as to the degree to which the author/redactor of these testaments wants us to understand the moral transformation of the brothers as the result of Joseph's forgiveness by attributing to them the characteristics of love and mercy cited above. In addition, the parallels between "and if a man sins against you, / speak to him in peace" and Jesus's injunction, "[b]ut if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also" (Matt. 5:39), also seem evident. This affinity, in turn, may lend support to those who claim, as cited earlier, that the versions of the *Testaments* that are available to us are inflected by Christian redactions; on the other hand, it may be that the work later appealed to Christians because it emphasized these sentiments. In any

case, the prominence in the *Testaments* of love and forgiveness as guiding virtues is clear.

Nevertheless, while Gad appears to have managed to quell his hatred, to have turned toward God through “the love of one’s neighbour” (T. Gad 4:2; 324),²⁰ and even advocates the principle of forgiveness as a response to repentance, ultimately the depiction of Joseph’s forgiveness of his brothers is what concerns us here. While the biblical narrative and *The Book of Yashar* offer essentially conflicting portrayals of the sensibilities that motivate the protagonist, what, if anything, distinguishes Joseph here? If his brothers profess to have returned to God and His commandments, can we claim for Joseph any degree of moral superiority? What, according to his testament, occurs within Joseph in his moment of reconciliation? Ironically, Joseph’s testament deals very little with the episode leading up to the reconciliation, nor do we find much commentary on the principle of love-forgiveness that, judging from the other testaments, would seem to inform that moment in the view of the *Testaments’* author. While the concentration of the testament on Joseph’s encounter with Potiphar’s wife certainly is consistent with a significant portion of the exegetical tradition relating to Joseph (see particularly Kugel 1990), the general homiletic direction of the *Testaments* would seem to be one of reconciliation. Yet, whereas the Joseph of *The Book of Yashar* harps repeatedly on his brothers’ betrayal as he attempts to provoke a response, Joseph here might be seen to comply with the tone of humility that informs many of the testaments. In this conception, Joseph wishes “to save his brothers’ reputation” (Hollander / de Jonge 1985, 393) by not revealing the way in which he became a slave, and he even eschews criticism of them as he relates, for his children, his attitude toward them and toward the principle of love generally:

You see, children,
 how great things I endured,
 that I should put my brothers to shame.
 Do you, also, therefore, love one another
 and with patience hide one another’s faults;
 for God delights in the unity of brothers
 and in the deliberate choice of a heart distinguished in love.
 (Such was my attitude)
 also when my brothers came in Egypt,
 when they learnt
 that I returned the money to them
 and did not reproach them
 but even comforted them,
 and after the death of Jacob loved them more abundantly
 and did abundantly all things
 whatsoever he had commanded,
 and they were amazed.
 (T. Joseph 17:1-8; 403)

Regardless of whether this passage is part of the original design of Joseph’s testament or whether, as Hollander and de Jonge suggest, it represents a later interpolation (1985, 393; Zerbe 1993, 149), I cite it at length because of the way in which it brings into focus a number of the issues that I have attempted to address

in this essay. Here, Joseph claims that his actions have been infused with a sympathetic understanding of his brothers, one that has enabled him to transcend his own concerns and to care for their experiences and struggles. In asserting this benevolent intent, furthermore, Joseph – in yet another apparent attempt by the author to fill a gap in his motivation in the biblical account – claims to have replaced the money in his brothers’ bags (Gen. 42:25 and 43:1-2) out of concern for their wellbeing. In this way, the author dismisses the claims by some exegetes that Joseph replaces the money in order to confuse, to test, even to torment his brothers. Finally, the author posits, through Joseph, the claim that Joseph lacked the desire to “exalt myself among them in arrogance” (T. Joseph 17:8; 404; cf. *ibid.* 10:5; 390) – an assertion that directly contradicts the perspective of *The Book of Yasbar*.

The attempt to exalt Joseph in the *Testaments*, in fact, is left to Benjamin, who, as the final witness, binds Joseph’s example to the larger theological vision of the author. Benjamin, therefore, instructs us to follow “the example of the good and *holy* man Joseph” (T. Benjamin 3:1, 416, emphasis added), who by implication is understood to be one who “fears God and loves his neighbor” (*ibid.* 3:4, 417). The assertion that Joseph is “holy,”²¹ although implied even by the divine instrumentality of Joseph’s enslavement and eventual ascension to power in the biblical account (see Gen. 45:5 and 45:8), certainly promotes the perception of his more exalted status. Benjamin further reinforces Joseph’s benevolent image by suggesting that Joseph entreated his father to not hold the deeds of the brothers against them, indeed to pray for them, even though the biblical narrative gives no suggestion that Joseph or his brothers ever reveal to their father the truth behind Joseph’s disappearance (cf. Redford 1970, 151).

More significant to our discussion, however, is Benjamin’s notion of the effect of the purported holy man on those who do him harm: “For if any one does violence to a holy man, he repents; for the holy man is merciful to the reviler and holds his peace” (T. Benjamin 5:4; 421). Benjamin suggests that the mercy of one who has been wronged, the spiritual fortitude in the midst of struggle that characterizes the response of the holy man, promotes the repentance of the perpetrator. Yet this, too, extends well beyond the implication of the biblical version, in which the brothers admit their regret, even repentance, before they are aware that the man who stands in front of them is in fact the one whom they have wronged. His ‘holy’ example, indeed, does not serve to initiate their turning; rather, it is the perception that their misfortunes stem from their own sinfulness that prompts their reflection. When Joseph eventually does reveal himself, his identity and example instead facilitate the completion of a process that they have already begun.

4. Conclusion

By asserting this, I do not wish to minimize the contribution that Joseph makes to the reconciliation; rather, as I have suggested throughout this essay, it is precisely the neglect of Joseph's righteousness, in *The Book of Yashar*, and the excessive promotion of that quality, in the *Testaments*, that deprive the character of the tension of righteous internal struggle that so elevates the narrative in the Bible. To be sure, the *Testaments* articulate the inherent relationship between the commandment to love one's neighbor and the reconciliation, and both narratives draw from and clarify ambiguous or perplexing elements in the biblical text. Ultimately, though, their effectiveness as narratives of moral instruction is undermined by their failure to allow us either, in the case of *The Book of Yashar*, to feel compassion for Joseph; or, in the *Testaments*, to truly identify with his essential nature. In both cases, indeed, there is a failure to generate *catharsis*: The very return to God that enables Joseph to forgive his brothers remains out of our reach, insofar as the authors themselves have failed to apprehend this quality in the original.

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¹ Lazar (1989, ix) notes that the Hebrew word *Yashar*, which is preserved in the title of the English translation that he has edited, has been variously translated as "upright" or "righteous."

² My emphasis here on the effects of particular narrative features on readers of the three narratives will perhaps indicate my inclinations within the field of narrative theory. In general, I tend to subscribe to the rhetorical approaches developed by Sternberg (1978, 1985) and Phelan (2007), which emphasize, according to Phelan (2007, 7) the idea of "narrativity...[as] a double-layered phenomenon, involving both a dynamics of character, event, and telling and a dynamics of audience response." (I will have more to say on the concept of narrativity later, as part of my discussion of the *Testaments*.) For my application of these approaches to the dynamics of narrative sympathy, see Sklar 2009, 2013 and 2018.

³ All New Testament citations are from the translation in Metzger / Murphy 1991.

⁴ See Sklar (2013) for a detailed examination of the varieties and mechanics of sympathy in fictional narratives.

⁵ It is important to note, however, my emphasis on *Joseph's* repentance, rather than Schimmel's more conventional focus on the repentance demonstrated by the brothers.

⁶ Translation from Fisch (1992). All subsequent citations from the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) refer to this edition, unless otherwise indicated.

⁷ Jerusalemi (1968, 6) also mentions this as one possible rendering.

⁸ See Lockwood (1992) for a thorough explication of the similarities between Joseph's and Tamar's situations.

⁹ James Kugel (1990, 125) likewise notes Joseph's movement away from self-interest towards "virtue," by which he is "able to rise not only over the mighty nation of Egypt, but over the past defects of his own character, in order to emerge as the virtuous and exemplary leader we encounter at the end of Genesis." While characterizing Joseph's conduct in the later part of the story as virtuous, however, Kugel does not appear to suggest, as does White, the assumption on Joseph's part of a divine sensibility.

¹⁰ See, also, Abdulla (1985) for an examination of the role of *catharsis* in literature.

¹¹ Kugel (1990) uses the term "expansion" to describe the elaboration of "motifs" in a narrative in such a way that the story "expands" beyond the overt sense of the original. (See, for instance, his "Nine Theses" on *midrash* in Kugel 1990, 247-270.) This term should not be conflated with the idea of 'retelling' a narrative, since the latter may simply follow the source material without embellishment, in the same sense that film adaptations are sometimes said to have been 'faithful' to the novels on which they are based. This is not to say that even such literal retellings do not involve some forms of elaboration; however, an 'expansion,' by definition, builds upon the foundation of the original and then goes beyond its inherent sensibility.

¹² Of course, this very brief discussion of the nature and function of "midrashic" texts necessarily leaves out many of the nuances of meaning that scholars who specialize in midrash might wish to include. For thorough and engaging examinations of the history and purpose of such texts, and of midrashic activity generally, see, for instance, Boyarin 1990, Hartman and Budick 1986, and Fishbane 1993.

¹³ The English translation cited here is taken from *Libro de las generaciones / The Book of Yashar*, edited by Moshe Lazar (Culver City, CA: Labyrinthos, 1989), an 1840 work that editor Lazar describes as “a close literal rendering of the Hebrew text” (x). Unless indicated otherwise, all subsequent references to the English translation are from this edition. For the Hebrew text, see Joseph Dan (1986).

¹⁴ In the case of both of the post-biblical narratives that I am examining here, the stories themselves can be read without prior knowledge of the biblical text. Both narratives are plausible on their own terms, in the sense that they possess internal consistency both in terms of characterization and plot development. In *The Book of Yashar*, for example, Judah is consistently represented as the aggrieved party, despite his having contributed to the sale of his brother into slavery. This position is tenable within the structure of the narrative on its own terms – unless one is familiar with the stance provided by the biblical account, which views Judah’s role much more critically, as I will presently make clear.

¹⁵ The Hebrew version of this passage in *Sefer ha-Yashar* (Dan 1986, 190) is basically identical with the biblical text (Gen. 37:26). In terms of the present discussion, note also that in the Fisch (1992) translation of Gen. 37:26, “gain” is translated as “profit.”

¹⁶ It is worthwhile to reiterate here that Judah, while physically heroic in other portions of the Bible, is humbled repeatedly in the story of Joseph, and his character frequently cast in a negative light. Aside from his complicity in the sale of his brother and his self-interested (even murderous) treatment of Tamar, which takes place as an interlude in the middle of the Joseph narrative, we find other less obvious indicators of his moral inadequacy (cf. Alter 1981, 7).

¹⁷ While I rely heavily throughout this essay on a rhetorical approach to narrative, as noted earlier, my use of the term *narrativity* in this instance is intended to be much more general, even though a rhetorical understanding of the term will figure prominently in my discussion of the *Testaments*. Prince (1987, 64) provides a usefully broad definition: “The set of properties characterizing narrative and distinguishing it from nonnarrative; the formal and contextual features making a narrative more or less narrative, as it were.” This naturally presupposes that a narrative can be identified by all readers as such. While Herman (2009, x) argues that the features that constitute narrativity “will be realized in any particular narrative in a gradient, ‘more-or-less’ fashion,” it is also evident in the *Testaments* that they possess qualities that “make a story (interpretable as) as story,” as I will clarify presently.

¹⁸ The *Testaments* distinctly lack the sustained, progressive development of plot that the biblical narrative, despite the gaps described earlier, clearly possesses. For example, the testament of Joseph’s brother Reuben focuses mainly on the evils of lust and promiscuity, and provides snippets from the events of his life that taught him this lesson. Moreover, there is no mention in this testament of Joseph’s enslavement or the reconciliation with his brothers. In keeping with the moral theme of the testament, though, Reuben does emphasize Joseph’s resistance to Potiphar’s wife’s amorous advances (T. Reuben 4:8-11). Other testaments, as I will show presently, focus in more detail on the events of the biblical Joseph narrative; however, like the moral aims of Reuben’s testament, those testaments that do narrate the details of the biblical Joseph narrative use them for greater homiletical purposes: In T. Simeon, the character narrator Simeon uses his involvement in the betrayal of Joseph to warn against envy; in T. Zebulun, against ignorance; in T. Dan, against anger; in T. Gad, hatred. Interestingly, the testaments of Joseph and his brother of the same mother, Benjamin, emphasize love and compassion, with Joseph using the example of resistance to sexual temptation, and Benjamin providing details about the portion of the biblical narrative during which the reconciliation between the brothers takes place. In fact, each of the testaments mentioned above provides a different piece of the larger and more elaborate narrative that is related in the Bible.

¹⁹ Unless otherwise indicated, all citations from *The Testaments* are taken from this edition. For an alternative translation, see Kee 1983.

²⁰ The question of whether the command to love, as formulated here, extends beyond one’s immediate community is examined in some depth by Zerbe (1993, 147-48).

²¹ It should be noted that Zerbe translates the word rendered here with “holy” as “pious” (1993, 153). In either case, though, we must conclude, with Hollander and de Jong (1985, 42, emphasis added), that “Joseph plays an *exemplary* role in the Testaments.”