Finding Meaning in Incoherence: The Joseph Story Beyond Source Criticism

The story of Joseph is replete with narrative contradictions. Source criticism has long dominated the quest for textual coherence. But how are we to make sense of the integrated text?

[Prof. Edward L. Greenstein](https://www.thetorah.com/author/edward-l-greenstein)



*Joseph Sold by His Brothers*, Antonio del Castillo y Saavedra, ca. 1655-1660. Wikimedia

The Joseph story, like many Torah narratives, has doublings[1] (or in one case, treblings) with earlier stories in Genesis:

* Exile—Joseph’s exile from his homeland recalls those of his great-grandfather Abraham—in Egypt, and of his father Jacob—in Aram Naharayim (Syria).
* Favoritism—Joseph and his full brother Benjamin were favored by Jacob, as was their mother, Rachel.
* Theft of ritual object—Benjamin’s falsely imputed theft of Joseph’s divining cup evokes Rachel’s theft of her father Laban’s teraphim (household idols).
* Dreams—Joseph’s penchant for dreaming echoes his father Jacob’s.

Such doublings are a structural feature of the Joseph story, connecting it with the previous narratives.

Doubling within One Narrative

Another sort of doubling takes place within narratives.[2] In fact, the entire story of Joseph and his brothers is suffused with duality. The doubling is especially obvious in the dream accounts:

* Joseph dreams two dreams.
* Pharaoh dreams two dreams.
* Joseph’s two prison mates each has a dream.

But the narrative has other examples of duality as well:

* Two groups of merchants pass by Joseph and his brothers in Canaan: Midianites and Ishmaelites.
* Two brothers stand up for Joseph: Reuben and Judah.
* Potiphar, a palace official, purchases Joseph; Potiphera, priest of On, marries his daughter to Joseph.

Here we will focus specifically on the twofold tale of how Joseph was taken down to Egypt, beginning with how he himself describes it (twice).

Joseph Explains How He Got to Egypt: Sold or Stolen?

Joseph’s brothers descend to Egypt to buy food, and Joseph is in charge of selling it. He recognizes them, but they do not recognize him. He had left them an adolescent Canaanite slave, and standing before them was a high-ranking, mature Egyptian, Joseph, who tests them to see if they would protect their youngest brother, Benjamin. Judah, speaking for the brothers, rises to that occasion, and then Joseph reveals his identity to them, saying (Gen. 45:4-5):

בראשית מה:ד ...אֲנִי יוֹסֵף אֲחִיכֶם אֲשֶׁר מְכַרְתֶּם אֹתִי מִצְרָיְמָה. מה:ה וְעַתָּה אַל תֵּעָצְבוּ וְאַל יִחַר בְּעֵינֵיכֶם כִּי מְכַרְתֶּם אֹתִי הֵנָּה כִּי לְמִחְיָה שְׁלָחַנִי אֱלֹהִים לִפְנֵיכֶם.

Gen 45:4 …I am Joseph, your brother, whom you sold into Egypt. Now then, do not be pained, and do not be distressed, for your having sold me here—because it was to sustain life that Elohim sent me ahead of you.

Here Joseph describes the manner in which he was conveyed to Egypt: his brothers “sold him into Egypt.” This assertion reinforces the impression many readers have of how Joseph was taken down to Egypt, based on their understanding of Genesis 37: the brothers sold him to passing traders (see further below).

Stolen from Canaan

This version of events, however, conflicts with the version Joseph had given his fellow prisoners in Egypt, the royal cupbearer and baker, in 40:15:

בראשית מ:טו כִּי גֻנֹּב גֻּנַּבְתִּי מֵאֶרֶץ הָעִבְרִים וְגַם פֹּה לֹא עָשִׂיתִי מְאוּמָה כִּי שָׂמוּ אֹתִי בַּבּוֹר.

Gen 40:15 For I was stolen, yes, stolen, from the land of the Hebrews; and even here I have done nothing that they have put me in the pit.

“Stealing” a person in biblical parlance means kidnapping; compare, for example, Exod. 21:16:

שמות כא:טז וְגֹנֵב אִישׁ וּמְכָרוֹ וְנִמְצָא בְיָדוֹ מוֹת יוּמָת.

Exod 21:16 Anyone who steals a person and sells him, and he (the person) is found in his (the kidnapper’s) hand, must be put to death, yes, death.

The explanation that Joseph was “kidnapped” from Canaan is inconsistent with the explanation that he was “sold” by his brothers. Was he captured by a third party or sold by his brothers? It is tempting to avoid the problem by defining the brothers’ sale of Joseph as their kidnap of him, but a careful look at Genesis 37 shows the same conflict of two versions of the events.

Into the Pit: What Happened to Joseph in Genesis 37?

In Genesis 37, the opening chapter of the Joseph saga, Joseph is hated by his brothers, for tattling on them (v. 2), for being favored by their father (vv. 3–4), and for insensitively sharing with them dreams in which he dominates them (vv. 5–11).

When they see him approach, away from the homestead, out in the field, they plot to kill him (v. 18). The plan is to kill him (וְעַתָּה לְכוּ וְנַהַרְגֵהוּ) by throwing him into a nearby pit (וְנַשְׁלִכֵהוּ בְּאַחַד הַבֹּרוֹת; v. 20). Reuben, however, who intends to rescue Joseph later, when the brothers are unaware, objects to their killing him, suggesting instead that they cast him into a pit (v. 22):

אַל תִּשְׁפְּכוּ דָם הַשְׁלִיכוּ אֹתוֹ אֶל הַבּוֹר הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר בַּמִּדְבָּר וְיָד אַל תִּשְׁלְחוּ בוֹ

Do not spill blood—cast him into this pit in the wilderness, and extend not a hand against him!

The contradiction is blatant: in v. 20, throwing Joseph into the pit is a murderous move; in v. 22, it is an avoidance of murder.

The incoherence only grows. A caravan of Ishmaelite traders passes by, and Judah suggests that instead of abandoning Joseph to die in the pit, they should sell him to the merchants as a slave (vv. 26-27):

בראשית לז:כו מַה בֶּצַע כִּי נַהֲרֹג אֶת אָחִינוּ וְכִסִּינוּ אֶת דָּמוֹ. לז:כז לְכוּ וְנִמְכְּרֶנּוּ לַיִּשְׁמְעֵאלִים וְיָדֵנוּ אַל תְּהִי בוֹ כִּי אָחִינוּ בְשָׂרֵנוּ הוּא.

Gen 37:26 What is the gain in killing our brother and covering up his blood? 37:27Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let our hand not be on him, for he is our brother, our flesh.

Here again, throwing Joseph into the pit is represented as a hands-on killing, and a sale to the merchants is the alternative.

Meanwhile, Midianite traders come by, and, according to one possible reading, they remove Joseph from the pit and take him down to Egypt (v. 28):

בראשית לז:כח וַיַּעַבְרוּ אֲנָשִׁים מִדְיָנִים סֹחֲרִים וַיִּמְשְׁכוּ וַיַּעֲלוּ אֶת יוֹסֵף מִן הַבּוֹר וַיִּמְכְּרוּ אֶת יוֹסֵף לַיִּשְׁמְעֵאלִים בְּעֶשְׂרִים כָּסֶף וַיָּבִיאוּ אֶת יוֹסֵף מִצְרָיְמָה.

Gen 37:28 Midianite men, merchants, passed by; they drew up Joseph from the pit, and they sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites for twenty (units) of silver; and they brought Joseph into Egypt.

The clauses making up this verse can be read as a consecutive sequence, suggesting that the Midianites pull Joseph out of the pit; then, they (the masculine plural continues) sell him to the Ishmaelites; and the Ishmaelites take him down to Egypt. This, in fact, is how Rashbam (ad loc.) reads the verse.

קודם שבאו הישמעאלים עברו אנשים מדיינים אחרים דרך שם, וראוהו בבור ומשכוהו ומכרוהו המדיינים לישמעאלים.

Before the Ishmaelites arrived, a group of Midianites passed along the way, saw him (Joseph) in the pit, and drew him out and sold him to the Ishmaelites.

Although plausible, this reading is problematic. For one thing, the phrase וַיִּמְכְּרוּ אֶת יוֹסֵף לַיִּשְׁמְעֵאלִים “and they sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites” echoes Judah’s plan for the brothers, לְכוּ וְנִמְכְּרֶנּוּ לַיִּשְׁמְעֵאלִים “Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites.” This suggests that the subject of these two verbs is the brothers, not the Midianites.

Another problem is that, according to v. 36, it is *Medanim*, “Medanites” (an apparent variant of *Midyanim,* “Midianites”), who sell Joseph in Egypt.[3] This stands in contradiction to 39:1, in which Potiphar purchases Joseph from “the hand of the Ishmaelites”:

בראשית לט:א וְיוֹסֵף הוּרַד מִצְרָיְמָה וַיִּקְנֵהוּ פּוֹטִיפַר סְרִיס פַּרְעֹה שַׂר הַטַּבָּחִים אִישׁ מִצְרִי מִיַּד הַיִּשְׁמְעֵאלִים אֲשֶׁר הוֹרִדֻהוּ שָׁמָּה.

Gen 39:1 So Joseph had been taken down to Egypt, and Potiphar, Pharaoh’s official, chief of the cooks, an Egyptian, bought him from the hand of the Ishmaelites, who had taken him down there.

Traditional commentators such as Rashi resolve the inconsistency by imagining that Joseph was sold twice, but the simple fact remains that 39:1 says that Joseph was delivered to Egypt by Ishmaelites while 37:36 says that he was delivered by Medanites [Midianites].

Joseph’s Reports and the Complex Narrative of Genesis 37

As noted above, these two narratives—Joseph was sold by his brothers to Ishmaelites, Joseph was kidnapped from the pit by Midianites—are echoed in Joseph’s own reporting later on in the story. In that light, verse 37:28 can, and I would maintain should, be read in two alternate ways: Midianites pulled Joseph out of the pit and took him down to Egypt, where they sold him as a slave; or: the brothers drew Joseph out of the pit and sold him to the Ishmaelites, who then sold him as a slave in Egypt.

Source Criticism Doesn’t Excuse Us from Reading the Text

So which was it? Asking this question presupposes that the narrative must be unified and consistent, i.e., that the text should have one answer. This assumption has been an operative principle of source and redaction criticism (also called “higher criticism”) of the Torah for more than two centuries.

In this method, contradictions are resolved by positing that the present text is composed of two distinct sources that have been interlaced (the documentary approach), or that a base text has been supplemented by later additions or layers (the supplementary approach).[4]

Such approaches then interpret the text only by teasing out two (or more) strands, and reading each of them independently of the other.[5] That is how most modern scholarly treatments have made sense of the narrative.

Such an approach suggests that ancient Near Eastern texts must be consistent;[6] this is a questionable assumption. More seriously, it fails to read the text. Instead of seeking to read the incoherent text, whether composite or not, it divides and conquers— fragmenting the text into what the contemporary critic, applying modern notions of sense and logic, regards as its sensible components.

Trying to reconstruct the literary sources and layers that lie behind the present text is something historians need to do. Historians work with documents they can date and place as well as they can. But that is not reading the text. The text we have is a literary work that has been composed by someone(s). It is a literary composition that was felt to be readable (in some way) by whoever put it together. Reading the Bible and the act of biblical interpretation entail an engagement with the integrated text.

A Reading Strategy for Composite Texts: Meaningful Blurring

Forty years ago I called on biblical scholars to develop reading strategies that would tackle composite texts, in particular the story of Joseph’s descent to Egypt.[7] I suggested in this instance, and in a comparable textual situation in Numbers 16, where the stories of Korah’s rebellion and Datan and Abiram’s rebellion against Moses’ leadership are similarly intertwined, that the interweaving of two narratives can be interpreted in a meaningful way.[8]

In both instances, the details of the narratives are blurred by the conflict between two versions. Rather than seeking to clarify the blur, I sought to embrace it. The blur is not an obstruction to making meaning—it is the medium of the meaning.

The two groups of rebels against Moses fade for lack of clarity. But when the dust settles, it is Moses who remains standing as the uncontested leader. Similarly, in the story of Joseph’s descent to Egypt, the course of human events that led to this outcome is blurred by inconsistency.

Was Joseph sold or kidnapped? Was he taken to Egypt by these or by those? If we take into account the full textual data, we don’t know. And that is the point. We don’t know in the end what human factors caused Joseph to arrive in Egypt according to the story. But we have one explicit explanation from a theological perspective.

God Stands Out Clearly in the Haze

As Joseph explains to his brothers (Gen 45:5): כִּי לְמִחְיָה שְׁלָחַנִי אֱלֹהִים לִפְנֵיכֶם “it was to sustain life that Elohim sent me ahead of you.” On the theological level, Joseph’s descent to Egypt was part of a divine plan to preserve the life of Jacob’s clan during a seven-year famine. The double theological message—that in spite of appearances, God is both active behind the scenes and working on behalf of Israel—is unequivocal.

The psalmist combines the human and divine perspectives together in the two lines of one couplet:

תהלים קה:יז שָׁלַח לִפְנֵיהֶם אִישׁ; לְעֶבֶד נִמְכַּר יוֹסֵף

Ps 105:17 He (God) sent ahead of them a man; Joseph was sold into slavery.

The psalmist, like Andrew Lloyd Webber in his musical, *Joseph and the Amazing Technocolor Dreamcoat*, simplifies by citing only one version of Joseph’s descent to Egypt—selling rather than kidnapping. But the narrative in the Torah gives repeated expression to two versions, leaving us confused about the human factors, thereby highlighting the unequivocal role of God.[9]

[View Footnotes](https://www.thetorah.com/article/finding-meaning-in-incoherence-the-joseph-story-beyond-source-criticism)

1. “Doubling” is a literary term describing repetition of structure. It should be distinguished from “doublet,” a source-critical term that refers to alternative versions of a text that were separately transmitted before being edited together in a composite text. “Doubling” often goes under the broader name of “repetition”; see, e.g., Jacob Licht, *Storytelling in the Bible* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1978), chaps. 3 and 4. See further Elizabeth R. Hayes and Karolien Vermeulen (eds.), *Doubling and Duplicating in the Book of Genesis*(Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2016).
2. Editor’s note: For a discussion of how the related literary technique of repetition with variation is utilized in the Joseph story, see Gary Rendsburg, [“The Joseph Story: Ancient Literary Art at Its Best,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-joseph-story-ancient-literary-art-at-its-best) *TheTorah* (2017).
3. The Medanites are technically distinct from the Midianites. Medan and Midian are two of the sons born to Abraham through his wife Keturah (Gen. 25:2). In our verse, however, they are apparently variants of the same group; cf., e.g., Ernst Axel Knauf, “Medan,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4.656.
4. For higher-critical solutions to this textual knot, see Matthew C. Genung, *The Composition of Genesis 37: Incoherence and Meaning in the Exposition of the Joseph Story* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017). Editor’s note: For some examples of source critical analyses of parts of the Joseph story along the lines noted here, see Ben Sandler, [“Encountering the Documentary Hypothesis in the Joseph Story,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/encountering-the-documentary-hypothesis-in-the-joseph-story) *TheTorah* (2014); Zev Farber, [“Jacob's Multiple Death Scenes,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/jacobs-multiple-death-scenes) *TheTorah* (2014); *idem*, [“Joseph in Custody: Enslaved or Imprisoned,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/joseph-in-custody-enslaved-or-imprisoned) *TheTorah* (2015).
5. Technically, the supplementary approach doesn’t read the later layers without the earlier layers. Nevertheless, the basic approach is diachronic, not synchronic. “Original” sections are determined on the basis of their internal unity and flow, and then redactional layers or passages are identified that alter and adapt the original narrative sections to new purposes and/or settings.
6. See now Joshua A. Berman, *Inconsistency in the Torah: Ancient Literary Convention and the Limits of Source Criticism*(New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). See also Edward L. Greenstein, Review of *The Formation of the Pentateuch: Bridging the Academic Cultures of Europe, Israel, and North America*, *Review of Biblical Literature*(on-line) 1/2019 (9 pp.), and the literature cited there.
7. See the article cited in n. 9, the first version of which I delivered at a conference in 1979.
8. Editor’s note: For a source-critical look at these stories, see TABS Editors, [“Korah, Datan, and Abiram: A Case Study for the Methods of Academic Biblical Studies,”](https://www.thetorah.com/series/korah-datan-and-abiram-case-study) *TheTorah* (2014); Jason Gaines, [“Korah's Poetic Rebellion and God’s Flowery Response,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/korahs-poetic-rebellion-and-gods-flowery-response) *TheTorah* (2017). For an attempt to read the story as a whole, while taking source division into account, see Rachel Adelman, [“The Mysterious Literary Life and Death of Korah,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-mysterious-literary-life-and-death-of-korah) *TheTorah* (2014).
9. This essay is based primarily on Edward L. Greenstein, “An Equivocal Reading of the Sale of Joseph,” in *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives, Volume II*, ed. Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis, James S. Ackerman, Thayer Warshaw (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), 114–125, 306–310. I expect to publish a rewritten version of that essay in a forthcoming book, *Reader Responsibility: Making Meaning in Biblical Narrative*.