

The Story of Joseph and Potiphar's Wife:
Thomas Mann's *Joseph and His Brothers* and his Early Jewish and Christian Sources

by

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Abstract

The story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife in the Book of Genesis has captivated the literary imagination of writers for centuries. The entire cycle of Joseph is distinctly literary; it is presented as a coherent, linear story and narrows in on certain episodes with unusual detail. Joseph is a transitional character, whose narrative facilitates the transition from the cycles of the patriarchs in Genesis to the epic of Exodus and ultimately the tribal, disseminated state of the people of Israel. These characteristics, combined with the enigmatic quality of Joseph himself, have led the Jewish and Christian interpreters to study and interpret these texts' exploration of 'life among the other' with particular zeal.

The text these interpreters face is fraught with ambiguity. God's promise of land and prosperity to Abraham, with no indication of a timeline, creates a tension him and for his descendants, between the choices they make in their daily life and their understanding of the role those choices play in the long-term divine plan. This anxiety is realized over and over in the Hebrew Bible, and becomes a particularly urgent tension when the chosen people are faced with 'life among the other.' Joseph's narrative illustrates the pathos of being a chosen people, for it shows that Joseph faces uncertainty in his every choice. This tension between Joseph's actions and God's plan will never be resolved one way or the other; the tension is therefore amplified in the early Jewish and Christian interpretive traditions I examine in this study. Centuries later, Thomas Mann seeks to resolve this tension in his epic *Joseph and His Brothers*.

In this thesis, then, I will begin in my first chapter by establishing the complex questions which arise from the original Genesis text on Joseph. In turning next to the 'inter-biblical exegesis' on Joseph in the Book of Deuteronomy, the Psalms, the Book of Acts and the Book of Hebrews, I arrive at the first level of 'displaced' sacred text. In contrast to these historically bound texts, my third chapter examines the *midrash* of fourth and fifth-century C.E. Rabbis on Joseph in *Genesis Rabbah*, which has a heavily theological slant and tends to be a-historical. All three chapters allow me to study the development of the figure of Joseph from his nascent state in Genesis to his more complex incarnation—for example, associated with a tribe and thus a geopolitical reality—several centuries of textual production later. The methodologies of this development, as well as the amplified ambiguities which evolve from it, are critical to understanding Thomas Mann's project; Mann's Joseph is laden with such historical and religious meaning, which makes his often irreverent attitude towards this tradition all the more complex.

In my fourth chapter, I turn to a body of text on Joseph which represents a sustained examination of the anxieties of his 'life among the other'—and by implication, his quotidian relationship with God and His plan. The very urgent historical concerns of Hellenistic Jews living in Egypt between the second century B.C.E. and the second century C.E. come to bear in a significant way on their appropriation of the Joseph narrative. In examining these texts, we can better understand how Mann's own biography interjects into his re-imagination of Joseph, and how he relates his own project to that of these Alexandrian Jews. Mann's novels respond to both the interpretive pressure inherent in the original Genesis text and the ambiguity amplified in the Joseph tradition. In this final chapter, I study the influence of the author's own life on Joseph, his methodology in the context of modern biblical criticism, and finally his constructed characters of Joseph and God and their particular relationship.

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Short Titles

IPH: Kugel, James L. *In Potiphar's House: The Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1990.

2Intros: Kugel, James L. "Two Introductions to Midrash." *Midrash and Literature*. G.H. Hartmand and S. Budick, Eds. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986. pp. 77-103.

Introduction

Thus some origins are of a conditional sort, marking both in practice and in fact the primal beginning of the particular tradition kept by a given community, people, or family of faith, but in such a way that memory, even when advised that the well's deeps can in no way be considered earnestly plumbed, may find national reassurance in some primal event and come to historical and personal rest there.

Thomas Mann, 'Descent into Hell' (1933)

A handsome young man is accosted by an older woman; after he rejects her on account of his loyalty to his father and his God, she falsely accuses him of rape and he is thrown in jail—but is later restored to greater fortune. The story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife in Chapter 39 of the Book of Genesis fits a literary archetype which has incarnations in the folklore of an impressive range of world cultures. In John D. Yohannan's work *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife in World Literature: An Anthology of the Story of the Chaste Youth and the Lustful Stepmother*, he diagrams the genealogy of the archetype. He includes both proven historical connections and mere conjecture; he claims that "some stories resemble each other *because* they were diffused from a common source, and others *despite* the fact that they were independently created."¹ In other words, Yohannan's family tree for this archetype argues the existence of four root stories, all of which may have come into being independently of each other: the Egyptian 'Tale of Two Brothers' (c.1500 B.C.E.), the Biblical narrative in Genesis 39 (c.1500-1000 B.C.E.), the classical drama of Euripides' *Hippolytus* (c.500 B.C.E.), and the Buddhist myth of Kunala and Tishya-rakshita (c.500 C.E.). The proposed descendants of these tales include, among others, apocryphal works by Jews in Hellenistic Egypt, the story of Yusuf in the Qur'an and its relatives

¹ John D. Yohannan, *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife in World Literature: An Anthology of the Story of the Chaste Youth and the Lustful Stepmother*, (New York: New Directions Books, 1968), 2.

in medieval Persian poetry, Racine's *Phèdre* and, finally, Thomas Mann's *Joseph and His Brothers*.

Although the permutations of this tale are clearly numerous, the story generally unfolds in a similar manner. Yohannan argues that “The tone of these and other variations on the theme ranges from the didactically moral through the somberly tragic, the lyrically musical and the humorously ironic to the flippantly diverting” (Yohannan, 1). He explains that the tenor of the story varies with the motive for the woman's seduction, from lust, love, or sometimes even concern for the succession of her children. The youth invariably remains chaste, but not as a result of asceticism. His reasons more commonly result from a fear of divine or earthly repercussions, “or from a concern for social morality” (Yohannan, 6-7).

In this thesis, I will focus on the branch of this story rooted in the Book of Genesis. The conspicuous literary features of the Joseph narrative, as well as the range and depth of thematic material explored, have drawn generations of exegetes to the story. Just as the archetype of the ‘chaste youth and lustful stepmother’ has spread across the pages of literary history, interpreters have disseminated the particular story of Joseph across the varied and diverse communities of the Jewish and Christian traditions.

What does it mean to re-imagine the narrative of a sacred text? To embark upon such a project is to displace the sacred text; to borrow its sacredness—its resonance in our common cultural memory—but to focus its attention to another purpose, whether that purpose be theological, historical, or some combination of both. When borrowed in the context of early Jewish and Christian communities, the exegete is by definition working in a religious sphere. Thus the Genesis text is always present in the writer's mind, always revered and never fully replaced, but supplemented with material loyal to the writer's intent and context.

Yet the Genesis text that is foremost in these interpreter's minds is fraught with ambiguity. The characterization of Joseph lends itself to use as a parable of morality or exemplary success in the land of the 'other.' His conduct in Egypt can be construed as a simple model of maintaining one's ancestral identity while managing to prosper in a foreign context. And yet Joseph's narrative explores the very complex relationship between his autonomous decisions to remain faithful to the religion of his father in a foreign land and his identity as one of God's 'chosen', who is therefore protected from ultimate harm and, perhaps, from committing a fatal sin. This relationship is memorably examined in his chastity in the face of the seduction of Potiphar's wife in Genesis 39.

The Genesis text demonstrates that God grants Joseph certain traits, both psychological and physical, which mark him as chosen and facilitate his unnatural success in impossible situations. Ironically, these traits work both to his advantage and his detriment. For example, his prophetic dreams prompt his brothers' hatred, and his striking physical beauty prompts the lust of Potiphar's wife; ultimately, however, these traits guarantee his ascent from slave to courtier in Egypt. With this newfound power comes the ability to right the wrong done to him by his brothers in childhood—perhaps a more far-reaching redemptive action for the familial pattern of lies and deceit—and to reconcile his family on the brink of a major transition in Israelite history. For Joseph's narrative catalyzes the transition of the Hebrews into Egypt and, ultimately, out of Egypt into the Promised Land. This transition also marks the dissemination of the people of Israel, indicated textually in the transition from the stories of the patriarchs to the stories of the tribes.

The ambiguity of this text is reflected on a greater scale. I argue that the Joseph narrative exegetes confront in Genesis questions the nature of being a 'chosen' people. In the text,

Abraham and his descendants face a God who presides over history, promising his chosen ones prosperity and land at some indeterminate point in the future—but who does not reveal how or when these promises will be fulfilled. Into this presumably ‘interim’ space enter the narratives of autonomous and complex characters who must live and make choices each day. The revelations of their God seem to imply that their actions may lead to the fulfillment of his plan, but does that mean *all* of their daily actions? Could they be unwittingly acting against the plan without intending to? Are they acting of their own will? In other words, did Joseph succeed in Egypt because God orchestrated it, or because of his own talent—or is that essentially the same thing?

God’s covenant with Abraham creates a confrontation with time for him and for his descendants, between the imminent circumstances of daily life and the intangible, long-term movement towards the divine plan. This uncertainty forces the characters of Genesis to become ingenious and to trick and manipulate their way to success. Such an end seems aligned with their understanding of God’s plan for them—but does it justify the means? This anxiety is realized over and over in the Hebrew Bible, and becomes a particularly urgent tension when the chosen people are faced with ‘life among the other.’ Tense moments such as Joseph in Egypt create interpretive pressure, realized in the production of hundreds of texts imagining the particulars of Joseph’s life—the options from which he daily chose and the constant search for God’s hand in his actions.

Joseph’s narrative illustrates the pathos of being a chosen people, for it shows that Joseph faces uncertainty in his every choice. This tension between Joseph’s actions and God’s plan will never be resolved one way or the other; the tension is therefore amplified in the early Jewish and Christian interpretive traditions I examine in this study. Since these exegetes operate within a distinctly religious context, though they may seek to define the nature of Joseph’s daily choices

in relation to the covenant, they cannot *replace* the ambiguity of the sacred text with certainty. Rather, they can—and do—*displace* this ambiguity into more fully realized and fleshed out narratives which often approach a definition of Joseph’s relationship to God. Even if one philosophy dominates for a particular exegete, its opposite will, it seems, inevitable re-emerge, both because ‘life among the other’ is so rich with ambiguities surrounding every decision, and because the source text in Genesis is so laden with interpretive ambiguity. Such ambiguity is, in fact, inherent to the nature of a sacred understanding of the world; the ‘mystery’ of God, integral to the maintenance of religious faith, is de-valued in fully resolving the tensions of a sacred text.

Thousands of years after this initial ‘displacement’ of Joseph in early religious spheres, Thomas Mann embarked upon a massive intervention into this literary tradition in his tetralogy *Joseph and His Brothers*. Mann audaciously resolves the tensions realized in Genesis and amplified in early exegetes in a fully defined depiction of the relationship between God and his ‘chosen’ people. In this thesis, I explore how Mann could take the process of ‘displacement’ to this new level; why can Mann turn on the authority of the text? In other words, what is gained in the distance of centuries from this tradition, and what exists in Mann’s world which allows him to displace the text so ruthlessly?

In order to grasp Mann’s relationship to this tradition he so confidently succeeds, I explore the factors or elements of the original texts which facilitate the transition from the more sacred appropriation of the Joseph story to the secular; what is preserved in Mann’s re-imagining of the story and what is discarded. How does Mann’s attempt to relate this Joseph story to the context of his own life further this displacement? I look in particular to his inheritance of the episode between Joseph and Potiphar’s wife. For example, in the religious context of the early Joseph tradition, demonizing the character of Potiphar’s wife was almost a necessity; how does

Mann gain the authority to make her character sympathetic? What does this say about his understanding of ‘life among the other’ and the question of assimilation?

Most critically, I will attempt to determine if the original tension from Genesis—between the daily life of the ‘chosen’ people and the long-term divine plan—is, in fact, resolved as resoundingly in Mann’s work as he seems to suggest. Are there aspects of his methodology, for example, and his narrative self-positioning which undermine this resolution? Is such a tension no longer relevant in the modern secular world, or is it simply perpetuated in a different way?

In this thesis, then, I will begin in my first chapter by establishing the complex questions which arise from the original Genesis text on Joseph. In turning next to the ‘inter-biblical exegesis’ on Joseph in the Book of Deuteronomy, the Psalms, the Book of Acts and the Book of Hebrews, I arrive at the first level of ‘displaced’ sacred text. Joseph is taken out of the context of his own life story in Genesis and gains new meaning as he is employed for new purposes: as a transitional figure to the reality of the tribal world, as a model for those suffering in exile, and as a figure of suffering. In contrast to these historically bound texts, my third chapter examines the *midrash* of fourth and fifth-century C.E. Rabbis on Joseph in *Genesis Rabbah*, which has a heavily theological slant and tends to be a-historical. All three chapters allow me to study the development of the figure of Joseph from his nascent state in Genesis to his more complex incarnation—for example, associated with a tribe and thus a geopolitical reality—several centuries of textual production later. The methodologies of this development, as well as the amplified ambiguities which evolve from it, are critical to understanding Thomas Mann’s project; Mann’s Joseph is laden with such historical and religious meaning, which makes his often irreverent attitude towards this tradition all the more complex. In my fourth chapter, I turn to a body of text on Joseph which represents a sustained examination of the anxieties of his ‘life

among the other’—and by implication, his quotidian relationship with God and His plan. The very urgent historical concerns of Hellenistic Jews living in Egypt between the second century B.C.E. and the second century C.E. come to bear in a significant way on their appropriation of the Joseph narrative. In examining these texts, we can better understand how Mann’s own biography interjects into his re-imagination of Joseph, and how he relates his own project to that of these Alexandrian Jews.

As Yohannan has demonstrated, the amount of interpretive literature on Joseph, as well as this archetypal tale, is staggering. I have chosen these specific works and not others primarily because they each foreshadow a significant interpretive choice or narrative methodology of Mann’s, several centuries later: the transitional and versatile role of Joseph in my second chapter, the *midrash* of Mann in my third, and the anxieties of ‘life among the other’ in my fourth. I also chose these texts for their roots in sacred communities in order to contrast their view of the tension at the center of Joseph’s story with Mann’s more secular one. Each interpretation narrows in with particular detail on the episode between Joseph and Potiphar’s wife, and they are all accessible to me in translation. I recognize that studying these works in translation merely increases my interpretive distance—I read even the Mann in John Wood’s new English translation—but I seek to analyze the literary presentation of the translation, and not the original.

The structure of my thesis serves to gather the necessary permutations of the Joseph tradition, arranged thematically, in order to fully understand Mann’s massive undertaking. Thus once I arrive at the Mann in my fifth chapter, the reader will hopefully be in a parallel position to that author at the site of his embarking on the project of *Joseph and His Brothers*. We, like Mann, will have fully realized not only the nuance of Joseph’s accumulation of meaning over centuries, but also the implications of ‘displacing’ sacred text even within a religious context for

this unresolved tension. Mann's novels respond to both the interpretive pressure inherent in the original Genesis text and the ambiguity amplified in the Joseph tradition. In this final chapter, I study the influence of the author's own life on Joseph, his methodology in the context of modern biblical criticism, and finally his constructed characters of Joseph and God and their particular relationship.

Chapter One: Joseph in Genesis

Within the larger framework of God's plan, the same thing can function alternately as a blessing and a disaster.

W. Lee Humphreys, The Character of God in the Book of Genesis (2001)

The Joseph Cycle in Genesis 37-50, in contrast to the patriarchal tales which precede it, is a coherent narrative which seriously contemplates the implications of 'life among the other.' The position this narrative holds is worth noting. Joseph neither fully belongs to the distinguished lineage of patriarchs before him, nor does he assume the role of a tribal founder, at least in the same way his brothers do. This uneasy pose seems to catalyze a major transition in the history of the people of Israel, marked textually by the close of the Book of Genesis and the opening of the Book of Exodus. Yet even if Joseph's role is not readily accessible—or repeatedly indicated like his father's and grandfather's before him—his transitional function becomes apparent in what scholar Aviva Zornberg refers to as the "inexorable causality" of his narrative.² This causality operates on two levels. Internally, the events of Joseph's life march forward, each clearly leading to the next. Externally, these events together lead to his family's emigration to Egypt, with ultimately devastating consequences for the descendants of Jacob.

Because of key thematic parallels to the narratives of Joseph's forefathers which *do* present themselves in Genesis 37-50, however, the text instructs us to identify Joseph as the inheritor of the 'chosen' or 'favored younger brother' line. Thus we know, despite God's conspicuous absence from Joseph's story, that it is indeed God orchestrating this causality—presumably as part of His larger plan. Joseph's identity as 'chosen' removes the element of suspense from his narrative; God will undoubtedly protect him from harm. But ironically, the

² Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis*, (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 252.

very qualities which mark him as ‘chosen’ lead equally to his misfortunes as to his fortune, giving the narrative a cyclical quality. This cyclical pattern begs the ancient question: what is the purpose of Joseph’s suffering? My focus on the confrontation between Joseph and Potiphar’s wife, a moment of particular pathos for Joseph, makes this inquiry integral to my project.

To answer this question, we must return to the concept of ‘God’s plan.’ We know that God has promised Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that He “will make of you a great nation” (Genesis 12:2).³ He has also reserved for them the land of Canaan—at some unknown future date. The specifics of *how* these events are going to come about remain a mystery, but each patriarch has dutifully obeyed God’s command with this covenant in mind. As God’s voice continues to remain silent through Joseph’s trials, this future prosperity seems even further off. During the fateful confrontation with his brothers, Joseph finally addresses this mystery, saying: “Now, do not be distressed or reproach yourselves because you sold me hither; it was to preserve life that God sent me ahead of you” (Genesis 45:5). He refers specifically to his own role in preventing the famine from devastating the people of the land, but also more generally to the survival of his own brothers—and not just physically; Joseph orchestrates the perceived reconciliation of his torn family. George W. Coats argues: “Joseph avers that his own move to Egypt was the result, not of the evil intended against him by the brothers, but of the good intended for him and for many survivors (the descendants of Jacob/Israel or perhaps all the families of the world who eat from the bounty stored by Joseph in Egypt) from the hand of God.”⁴ Joseph’s evocation of the covenant at this moment suggests an uneasy postulate: in order for God’s people to survive, and

³ Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, Ed, *The Jewish Study Bible*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). I use this translation for all following quotations from the Hebrew Bible.

⁴ George W. Coats, “Joseph, Son of Jacob,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Ed. David Noel Freedman, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), Vol 3, 978.

by implication, eventually enter the Promised Land, Joseph must be ‘Egyptianized’—he must assimilate.

Before I delve into the text to examine the implications of these matters, I must pause for a note on my purpose. In the world of literary (and biblical) criticism, it is often argued that every act of reading is interpretive. When designating ‘levels’ or ‘methods’ of interpretation, scholars struggle to classify what it means to simply regard the original text for its ‘original’ meaning without bringing in any outside influences or motives. For especially with texts so far removed from our understanding and our own time, how can we possibly begin to grasp an ‘original’ intent? The Hebrew language in particular *requires* the cognitive act of interpretation—lacking vowels and punctuation, the reader must contextualize to the best of their ability in order to denote even a single word. The remainder of this thesis is heavily influenced by such concerns of the relationship between an interpreter and his text; here, however, I wish to work briefly outside of these concerns. Therefore in beginning with the original text of the Joseph story in Genesis, I do not claim to approach the text objectively or to strip it of interpretation, nor do I claim to offer a unique take on the text. Quite simply, in order to trace how these stories and characters were adapted by certain groups of people, I must begin with the text itself, and survey the critical questions it raises.

In its literary structure, the Joseph narrative is distinct from the rest of the Book of Genesis. Generations of writers have been attracted to this literary distinctiveness, which lends itself, for example, to expansion on the epic scale of Mann’s work. It is presented as a coherent story with a beginning, middle, and conclusion; it lingers on certain key episodes with detail; it

traces themes and motifs.⁵ Coats notes an absence of theophanies and reference to cultic sites, in contrast to the majority of Genesis (Coats, 936). In fact, as I will discuss later in this chapter, God as a character—as we have known him in the Book of Genesis—is strikingly absent from the adventures of Joseph. The story unfolds as a series of alternating encounters with adversaries and benefactors, each resulting in a change in Joseph’s status, symbolized by his clothing (Coats, 936). These encounters are framed with material from the ‘priestly’ source for Genesis (37:1-2 and 50:12-14); biblical critics in fact disagree over whether the ‘Joseph novella’ was a later, independent addition to Genesis. Some theorize that the story’s thematic connections to contemporary folktales suggest that it was adopted from popular oral tradition—most notably, the Egyptian ‘Tale of Two Brothers’—for the purpose of transitioning the family of Abraham into Egypt and the Book of Exodus. Coats argues that two traditional literary archetypes emerge in this story: “(1) the rise of a young man, his fall due to an injustice, and his restoration to favor; (2) a stranger or a foreigner or a pauper is summoned to answer a question that the wise of the land cannot answer” (Coats, 954). The narrative of Joseph also has strong connections to the ancient genre of wisdom literature, most notably in chapters 40-41, which often portrays a sage who advises kings and interprets dreams; von Rad argues that “the Joseph narrative is a didactic wisdom story, which leans heavily on influences emanating from Egypt” (Coats, 954). The ‘rags to riches’ element of Joseph’s narrative can alternately be divided into three scenes designed to depict him as an ideal administrator: in Potiphar’s house, in prison, and in the royal court (Coats, 980).

If the Joseph chapters are distinct in literary quality from the rest of Genesis, then what role does the character of Joseph play in the continuity of narrative for Abraham’s line? Joseph’s

⁵ James L. Kugel, *In Potiphar’s House: The Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1990), 13.

name is not included in the standard invocation of the patriarchs of Israel, “Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (Exodus 6:3); some argue that the transitional function of his story supports the idea that he may ‘belong’ to the next generation (Coats, 976). Yet others counter that the Joseph story is arguably bound into the Jacob saga because of the position of the death report for Jacob in Genesis 49—while Joseph’s story is drawing to a close (Coats, 977). Coats summarizes: “Joseph is not presented as a cult founder or patriarch (except as the father of Ephraim and Manasseh) but as the favored son of Jacob who ascends to authority” (Coats, 936). Such an uncertain role for Joseph may be tied to the competing agendas and loyalties of both the authors and editors of the Book of Genesis. Most scholars speculate that the Joseph section was written down during the early monarchy or Solomonic court around the tenth century B.C.E., reflecting “in the tribal relationships a time when the Joseph tribes (Ephraim and Manasseh) were dominant”; another strain of thought argues that these writers “were rootless people living on the fringe of society,” pointing to the derogatory nature of the name ‘Hebrew’ attached to Joseph by Potiphar’s wife (Coats, 937). Although scholarship investigating the historical context of the sacred texts in Genesis is contentious and at times inconclusive, the relationship between contemporary tribal politics and the prominence of certain characters is evident elsewhere in Genesis. For example, the role of Reuben in the ‘E stratum’ of the Joseph narrative reflects early Israelite history when the tribe of Reuben was dominant; likewise, the role of Judah in the ‘J stratum’ is connected to a time after the rise of David when his tribe was important (Coats, 937).

In sum, Joseph’s role within his family is uncertain. Joseph does not fit easily into either the often scattered narratives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, which precede him, nor the stately narration of the exodus of thousands which succeeds him. But he shares qualities with both, such as the ingenuity of his father and the exilic status of Moses and his people. Joseph’s biography,

then, contains many varied points of entry for interpreters with assorted agendas. The diversified Joseph tradition, then, departs from the text in ever-widening angles for centuries; we can begin to understand why Mann's attempt at a comprehensive account occupies nearly 1,500 pages of text. We can also understand, though, why Mann chose Joseph's enigmatic, fully executed character as his point of entry into the Book of Genesis.

Yet another striking characteristic of the Joseph cycle is the total absence of God as we have known him up until this point in Genesis.⁶ God never speaks to Joseph either directly or even through an angelic messenger, as he does to Joseph's ancestors. It is striking that despite this characteristic, the text still comments on the relationship between man and God, and that Mann uses such a source to create a fully realized character of God. Again we see how the silences of sacred text create interpretive pressure to comment on the very issues they omit. In his study *The Character of God in the Book of Genesis: A Narrative Appraisal*, W. Lee Humphreys outlines the broad trajectory of God's involvement prior to Joseph: "The character God moves from almost constant engagement with humanity in Genesis 1-11, through regular involvement in the life of Abraham, to more sporadic direct engagement with Isaac and Jacob, to finally minimal engagement with Jacob's sons."⁷ Joseph is certainly positioned at the tail end of this trajectory, but the transition from Jacob—to whom God speaks regularly—to Joseph—left with little guidance apart from his dreams—is abrupt.

Humphreys argues that instead of a present, speaking figure of God, in these chapters the character of God is created by the words and actions of humans attempting to give meaning to

⁶ Interestingly, in the Book of Esther, which represents the other sustained study of 'life among the other' in the Hebrew Bible, the character of God is also totally absent, His name not even used.

⁷ W. Lee Humphreys, *The Character of God in the Book of Genesis: A Narrative Appraisal*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 205.

the events of their lives (Humphreys, 206). This quality opens the people's relationship with God to even more ambiguity, and again, lends itself to added interpretive possibilities. Besides what can be deduced from the ostentatious marks on Joseph which speak to his father's (and presumably, God's) favoritism, such as his beauty and his coat, God's hand also appears in Joseph's dreams. Humphreys notes that we know these dreams are divinely sent partially because of the Near Eastern archetype of prophetic dreams, but their "opaque symbolic elements" and their later fulfillment confirms this suspicion (Humphreys, 207).

We are told that God is 'with' Joseph in Egypt (Genesis 39:2-3); however, the divine presence seems to serve the prosperity of those around him more than Joseph himself. As I will discuss below, in fidelity to a Sinaitic law code which has not even been given yet, Joseph refuses the advances of Potiphar's wife, and avoids a sin against God—but not, ironically, the punishment that sin would prompt (Humphreys, 210). Humphreys argues that this cycle of Joseph's suffering and prosperity questions the claim that God was with Joseph; "...at the least, it indicates that the ways Yahweh is with Joseph are not immediately obvious" (Humphreys, 211). Humphreys also contends that for the peripheral characters in the story, such as his brothers and his master Potiphar, the characters of Joseph and God are linked. For example, in his sole appearance in Genesis 46:1-4, God speaks directly to Jacob (not Joseph) and instructs him to go to Egypt, promising to accompany him and his family there and back—but it is Joseph who goes about setting up his family in Goshen. The story certainly explores probing questions about the relationship of God to human autonomy. Zornberg writes that Joseph is arguably presented as a player in a "drama of God's devising":

God is the omniscient, skillful narrator, whose plot rests, apparently without artifice, on the plausible motivations of His characters. And yet, there is a peculiar and subtle horror

in such a perspective. For God not only fulfills His own intentions through the agency of human beings; He also makes them feel, through His plot-stratagems, fully responsible (Zornberg, 256).

Zornberg's argument takes for granted that God orchestrates the disobedience of his own creations and then punishes them for it, negating any notion of autonomy or free will. In the Book of Exodus, such a troubling construct is certainly presented in the 'hardening' of Pharaoh's heart by God (Exodus 7:3). Later exegetes, such as the Rabbis, argue that the change in heart of Joseph's brothers which leads them to sell him into slavery (instead of killing him) can be construed as a similarly heavy-handed intervention by God in order to properly arrange events. The early exegetes I study are religiously bound to this arbitrary and often cruel characterization of God in the Hebrew scriptures; they are left with little to no explanation for God's treatment of those in the way of his plan, and thus even more ambiguity. Freed from religious obligation to the text, Mann is quick to criticize this characterization. The absence of God in this text creates additional interpretive pressure; it forces the question of God, which in turn forces Mann in his own context to question the nature and even the existence of such a God.

Even if Joseph acts at times as an agent for God in Egypt, he has become quite a strange vessel; to facilitate his rise to power there, he has undoubtedly assimilated to foreign customs, even marrying—against the presumed Sinaitic code to come in later texts—a foreign woman and fathering two sons with her. Despite many instances of this exogamous pattern in Genesis, later exegetes struggle greatly with this aspect of the text, which seems to many a step too far in the direction of assimilation. Joseph names his first son Manasseh, “meaning, ‘God has made me forget completely my hardship and my parental home’”; the second son he names Ephraim, “meaning, ‘God has made me fertile in the land of my affliction’” (Genesis 41:51-52).

Humphreys argues: “[Joseph’s] words on the birth of his sons reminded us that his story as an Egyptian courtier was but a part of the encompassing story of his family” (Humphreys, 226). In other words, in spite of the contradictory ring to Joseph’s words, his assimilation into Egypt was necessary for the ultimate benefit of his family in God’s larger plan. This is further evidenced when Jacob takes Ephraim and Manasseh into the family on his deathbed, facilitating their new identity as tribal founders for Israel. The convention of the deathbed blessing, which I will discuss at length in later chapters, solidifies the transfer of generations and recalls God’s plan to preserve and proliferate the family.

Zornberg also reflects on the contrast between the Joseph story and its preceding narratives. She argues that where Joseph’s father, Jacob “*chooses* the modality of indirection, of volatile vicissitude,” Joseph’s life is marked by an “inexorable causality” (Zornberg, 252). She writes that “the fact of Joseph’s youth, his father’s special love for him, his brothers’ jealousy and hatred” causes the family’s disastrous emigration to Egypt (Zornberg, 252-253). In the Genesis account of Joseph’s mistreatment by his brothers, Joseph is named from the start as the son chosen to receive Jacob’s blessing. This favoritism of the younger brother, paralleled over and over in Genesis, presents serious problems for Joseph’s future; however, his future seems to have already been determined and therefore must be protected. Genesis states, “Now Israel [Jacob] loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age” (Genesis 27:3). This is thematically evocative of Abraham’s favoritism of Isaac as the miraculous child of his final years. Joseph’s brothers are jealous, and their hatred merely deepens when Joseph interprets his own dream, foreshadowing his future dominion over them, to their faces. Later exegetes, particularly the Rabbis, argue that all of Joseph’s later suffering is punishment for this initial, egregious error of narcissism. Mann develops this theme of Joseph’s

narcissism extensively. After Joseph repeats this mistake, Jacob rebukes him for his tactlessness. Yet the text states that while his brothers were again jealous, Jacob “kept the matter in mind,” (Genesis 37:11) suggesting that Jacob may recognize the truth in the prophesy.

Jacob is, however, the one who commands Joseph to seek out his brothers tending sheep, where they will conspire to kill him. At Jacob’s prompting, Joseph answers “Here I am” (Genesis 37:13). Most notably, Abraham answers God in the same way before the *aqedah*, giving the impression that God—and Jacob—may be sending Joseph to certain death. When Joseph finds his brothers, his brother Reuben is the sole voice of dissent, arguing to throw him in a pit. They eventually sell him to a caravan of Ishmaelites, a small reminder that this family has been chosen by God in place of those *not* chosen, namely the descendants of Ishmael. Concurrent with this exclusive mentality, when Judah dissuades his brothers from murdering Joseph, he argues that “[Joseph] is our brother, our own flesh” (Genesis 37:27). Perhaps Jacob’s sons recognize the danger to the continuation of their line and the fulfillment of God’s promise in killing one of their own. Yet they still betray him, forging a parallel between their deed and that of their own father in his youth. In fact, when the brothers return to their father with Joseph’s robe soaked in goat’s blood, Jacob’s own impersonation of his brother Esau by covering his arms in fur to gain his father Isaac’s blessing is powerfully evoked. This family, it seems, cannot help but deceive.⁸

⁸ In Humphreys’ study *The Character of God in the Book of Genesis*, he notes: “Through the ruse of the bloodied robe, the symbol of Jacob’s favor is now read by Jacob as the sign of his son’s death...God plays no overt role in this. As in Genesis 24—also a story of deceit and violence—God is absent” (Humphreys, 208). This implied argument, that God is significantly absent during ill deeds, adds another level to the question that Zornberg raised: are the members of this family responsible for the acts of deception they commit, if these acts serve to bring about key events in God’s plan?

In sum, as Joseph enters exile in Egypt, he is presented as the favored and chosen son in the Genesis story, the inheritor of God's blessing through his father's line. Consistent with the reversal of primogeniture in the rest of Genesis, Joseph as the younger brother essentially robs his elder siblings of this advantage. He does not hesitate to flaunt the skill which sets him apart, the interpretation of dreams, ensuring their revenge. His father Jacob has a presentiment that his sons will harm Joseph, yet sends him to an almost certain fate anyways; the episode concludes with him being deceived in nearly the same manner he tricked his own father. The connections to the story of Abraham and his sons are powerful in this story, leaving us with the impression that necessary sacrifices must be made to continue this line as God's chosen.

Can Joseph's refusal to sin with the wife of Potiphar—and its devastating consequences for his life—be seen as such a 'necessary sacrifice'? If we are to search for a greater meaning in his suffering besides the 'inexorable' march of causality towards, ultimately, the Promised Land, it must be in parable. In other words, James Kugel argues in his work *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now* (2007) that although Joseph's rejection of the woman is "important in the narrative principally because it was what landed Joseph in prison," it is also significant because "scarcely anyone else in the Hebrew Bible is ever confronted with sexual temptation."⁹ Those who are confronted tend to succumb, with disastrous repercussions—for example, Reuben with Bilhah, Judah with Tamar, Samson with Delilah, David with Bathsheba. This aspect of the text, interestingly, also contributes to its attraction to generations of exegetes, providing them an opportunity to highlight a model of chastity. The story is all the more appropriate for a parable of sexual morality on account of its occurrence in the land of the 'other.' For where are sexual transgressions most dangerous if not with an outsider, leaving a

⁹ James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible*, (New York: Free Press, 2007), 179.

chosen, shuttered people open to vulnerability through the uncontrolled desires of the body? In Kugel's other work, *In Potiphar's House: The Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts* (1990), he argues: "...there were few other possibilities in the Hebrew Bible that one might turn to in order to illustrate the virtues of chastity and resistance to temptation, whereas Joseph's *other* virtues...were shared by other biblical figures such as Abraham or Jacob or Daniel" (Kugel, 24).

Although both ancient and modern interpreters read much into the episode with Potiphar's wife, the text itself presents it as a moral dilemma primarily regarding property rights. The presence in the Hebrew scriptures of stories of other men succumbing to seduction argues for the absence of any particular religious emphasis against adultery or other sexual trespasses; apart from the expressions of Deuteronomistic law, the narrative of Torah demonstrates that sexual morality is not elevated as virtue in the tradition. In John D. Yohannan's analysis of the Genesis text, he mentions a playful *midrash* on the subject:

The Rabbi Jose was once asked by a young matron: 'It is possible that Joseph, at seventeen years of age, with the hot blood of youth, could act thus?' [i.e., reject the offer of the wife of his master]. Hard put to it, the Rabbi shrewdly answered that since the Torah had not scrupled to report the whole truth about sinners like Reuben and Judah, why should it have hesitated to tell it about Joseph—if, in fact, he had succumbed (Yohannan, 16).

Interpreters had varying reasons for re-casting the text to show how Joseph resisted adultery, which I will explore in depth later in Chapters Three and Four. It is important here to note the conspicuous lack of such a strain in the original Genesis text.

Instead, from the first verses introducing Joseph in Potiphar's house, issues of property are delineated and emphasized in the text. The authors demonstrate first how even as a slave in

Egypt, Joseph rises to a unique position of power—and thus responsibility—as a direct result of God’s favor: “The Lord was with Joseph, and he was a successful man; and he stayed in the house of his Egyptian master” (Genesis 39:2). His Egyptian master Potiphar notes that “the Lord lend success to everything [Joseph] undertook,” and so places him in a position of authority over his household, “placing in his hands all that [Potiphar] owned” (Genesis 39:3-4). This last statement underlines how radical it is for a slave to hold such power, and the verse that follows seems to foreshadow the repercussions of this reversal in the complacency of Potiphar: “He left all that he had in Joseph’s hands and, with him there, he paid attention to nothing save the food that he ate” (Genesis 39:6). Potiphar’s property is in Joseph’s capable hands, a fortune which is consistent with Joseph’s easy triumph over hardship in Egypt by God’s favor; the text, however, makes sure to show, ominously, that the master is not paying attention—and despite God’s favor, Joseph’s narrative so far demonstrates that his inheritance of Jacob’s blessing will not come without cost or trial. We may be sure, from precedent, that Joseph will endure, but not before he is placed at the bottom of the proverbial pit yet again.

Sure enough, the next verse states: “Now Joseph was well built and handsome.” Joseph’s vulnerability, it seems, is in exuding the qualities of one who is chosen—and descended from the beautiful Rachel. But as Joseph himself is made vulnerable by the attributes which mark him for success, so also the property that has been placed in Joseph’s responsibility is made vulnerable. When Potiphar’s wife casts her eyes upon him, then, Joseph’s response comes first from his obligation to the earthly master who raised him up, and second to his divine benefactor:

He said to his master’s wife, “Look, with me here, my master gives no thought to anything in this house, and all that he owns he has placed in my hands. He wields no more authority in this house than I, and he has withheld nothing from me except yourself,

since you are his wife. How then could I do this most wicked thing, and sin before God?

(Genesis 39:8-9)

The argument here is twofold: first, Joseph must respect the little property of his master that he has not been given authority over; second, he is obligated to a master who has elevated him. Coats argues: “When Potiphar’s wife attempts to seduce him, he refuses, not only because to submit would be a ‘sin against God,’ but also because it would violate the responsibility he carried as administrator of Potiphar’s house” (Coats, 977). Joseph’s invocation of God seems almost an afterthought—indeed, since there were no punctuation marks in the original Hebrew, the comma placed in verse nine by the editors of the Jewish Study Bible is interpretive. Without it Joseph seems to connect the potential sin directly to God; with it his concern lies primarily with sinning against his human master.

Although this is a critical ambiguity, either way Joseph’s reasoning for resisting Potiphar’s wife evokes the complicated nature of his relationship with his divine master—and recalls issues grappled with by his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather about what it means to be chosen. For Potiphar in this story treats Joseph just as God does; much of the text implies that Potiphar is merely an instrument of God’s plan for Joseph. Both lift him up out of iniquity on account of his talents, but in doing so place him in a position simultaneously of immense responsibility and obligation towards his benefactor. Two questions emerge here: does Joseph succeed in Egypt on the strength of his own morality and talent or on account of God’s favor—in other words, is he talented only because he is chosen, or the other way around; second, what precisely does Joseph’s obligation to his protector entail? Humphreys notes here that the end of Chapter 39 repeats the assertion that “God was with Joseph” again and again, using the Hebrew ‘*hesed*’; “Rarely...in the entire Genesis narrative is the very particular covenantal term *hesed*

used...[the term] can be translated ‘faithfulness, loyalty, loving kindness, fidelity.’ It is especially used of Yahweh’s continued support for Israel or its leaders” (Humphreys, 211). Once again, we see Joseph anointed as the successor to his father, with the suggested connotation, given his father’s morally questionable decisions, that he is excused of any error.

In many ways, the Joseph story is a means to an end, a manner of moving the narrative from the story of Abraham to the story of Moses and the Exodus. So are we meant to examine Joseph’s choices for their own merit—view him as a religious and moral model—or for their role in the momentum of the narrative? These critical questions all collide in this particular moment with Potiphar’s wife, when Joseph is given the opportunity to betray the opportunities that either have been granted to him or he has earned by his own virtue. It is important to note here that Potiphar’s wife is unnamed; Mann grants her a name, wishing to make her a more sympathetic character, but early exegetes contribute to her demonization by condemning her to anonymity.

Since later exegetes also contrast Joseph with other male sexual sinners in the Torah, we must linger a moment on the question of ‘what could have been.’ The Rabbis in particular imagine that in the pause before he answers the seductress’s demand, Joseph reflects on the potential consequences of engaging with her through the experiences of his own family, particularly Reuben. But later in scripture, King David’s transgression with Bathsheba provides such a striking parallel to Joseph’s circumstances that it is worth exploring. After David has sinned and gone to the trouble of killing Bathsheba’s husband, Nathan is sent by God to address his King’s sin. He tells a parable of a rich man who steals a poor man’s only possession in an attempt not to have to give anything up himself, and then exclaims:

That man is you! Thus said the Lord, the God of Israel: “It was I who anointed you king over Israel and it was I who rescued you from the hand of Saul. I gave you your master’s

house and possession of your master's wives; and I gave you the House of Israel and Judah; and if that were not enough, I would give you twice as much more. Why then have you flouted the command of the Lord and done what displeases Him? ... Therefore the sword shall never depart from your House" (II Samuel 12:7-9)

It is not difficult to imagine God saying this to Joseph if he had, indeed, committed a sin with Potiphar's wife. Again the text emphasizes property and obligation: God has granted David (and Joseph) unusual prosperity, and David has abused that privilege by taking more than what originally belonged to him. Since God has a habit of taking the possessions of others ("your master's wives") and giving them to his chosen—most disturbingly with the land of Canaan, requiring the eviction and killing of native peoples (Deut. 28:7)—the implication seems to be that such a power belongs only to God. In other words, the chosen cannot take it themselves without explicit permission. We must emphasize again that Joseph's act presumes the law to be given in the future at Sinai: "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife" (Exodus 20:14); however, a more comprehensive theology seems to have been applied by the editors to all parts of the text where such issues of property are concerned. As we imagine the possible repercussions of choices Joseph *could* have made, it is also worth noting that the Genesis characters who receive the 'blessing' above their brothers—Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph—do not seem to commit sins that are egregious enough for God to remove his blessing. Other characters, oftentimes their own brothers, are cast out of the family or denied of an inheritance for their mistakes, beginning with Cain and moving, for example, to the sexual transgressions of Ham and Reuben. The 'blessed' characters are far from faultless themselves. However, any interpreter who wishes to argue that Jacob, for example, is punished for his acts of trickery and deception must themselves designate the punishment; with the 'cast out' characters, on the other hand,

punishments are explicitly revealed by either God or their father. This may imply that had Joseph fallen to the temptations of Potiphar's wife, he would have been spared punishment on account of his 'blessed' status. Again, we are reminded of the richness of ambiguity in this text and its potential for interpretive creativity; Mann adds a new layer of sophistication onto these already complex issues.

Zornberg's chapter for Joseph is entitled "Remembering the Dismembered," arguing that the trauma of his brothers' betrayal is only healed in Egypt as Joseph desperately tries to gather the pieces of his own identity—and by extension, his family's (Zornberg, 273). In fact, many scholars note that the Abrahamic family is in crisis throughout the Joseph narrative; Joseph's suffering acts almost cathartically in bringing about their (disputed) redemption at the conclusion of the Book of Genesis. Coats echoes this theme of reconciliation, arguing that the story "revolves around the issue of strife that breaks a family apart...How can a family torn apart by strife be reconciled? Or, more to the point of the theology reflected in Gen 12:1-3, how can a family broken apart by strife serve as a vehicle for God's blessing?" (Coats, 981). Some critics argue that the answer is given in Joseph's leadership, again acting as an agent for God instead of direct divine intervention. Joseph's manipulations in Egypt turn his family from a troubled past to an apparent commitment to a common future; this commitment is symbolized in his plea for his brothers to "carry up my bones from here" to Canaan after he dies (Genesis 50:25). Yet, chillingly, the Book of Genesis concludes with the words: "Joseph died at the age of one hundred and ten years; and he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt" (Genesis 50:26). Such an overtly Egyptian burial, violating the religious rites of Joseph's family, is a resounding tribute to his assimilation. This ending seems to imply that because of the brothers' original sin in selling Joseph into slavery—and, by implication, Jacob's favoritism—it was *necessary* for Joseph to

assimilate to his exilic circumstances—to be legitimized in his brothers' eyes—in order for the reconciliation to come about and for his own sons to be included in Jacob's blessing. Again, we recall the extreme measures Jacob himself went to in order to procure his father's blessing; Joseph has certainly inherited his father's ingenuity, and God remains silent on how the choices of his chosen fit into the larger plan.

God's silence clearly increases pressure on interpreters to presume what His voice would say. The thematically rich Genesis story is ripe for 'displacement' in developing sacred communities, who relate widely to the issues presented in the text. The story becomes particularly accessible in the context of what becomes perhaps the most urgent theme of Jewish communities for centuries—exile. Yet, unlike the Book of Esther, which confronts similar issues of identity among foreigners (and has a similarly absent God), the Joseph narrative is overtly sacred in character and is salient to the theological issues surrounding Abraham and his family. This sacred character makes Mann's irreverence to the text all the more audacious centuries later.

Chapter Two: Joseph in the Bible

Even beyond the already complex and ambiguous portrait of Joseph in the Book of Genesis, the character of Joseph began to accumulate cultural meaning even within the rest of the Hebrew Bible. It is important to pause here and examine this early exegesis in order to understand how his character was ultimately presented to later exegetes, and to Mann, at the close of scripture. Even in these early stages, these reflections on Joseph indicate the versatility of his character, which is available to many different representations, primarily as a result of his transitional role. In this first ‘displacement’ of the Genesis story, Joseph’s character and story are focused elsewhere to fit the agendas of the different groups who wrote sacred text. In the Book of Deuteronomy and in the 105th Psalm, Joseph is employed as a transitional figure to the new reality of the tribal world and as a model exile; in the Christian texts of Acts and Hebrews, Joseph is a prototype for a suffering Jesus. That Joseph gains these new roles even *within* canonical scripture speaks to the extent to which the historical concerns of each Biblical author affected his work. In effect, tracing the references to Joseph elsewhere in scripture allows us to see history enacted on his character in ‘real time’, to watch the evolution of the tradition Mann inherits.

The process of creation and redaction for the texts which eventually became the scripture of Torah was a cumulative endeavor. I mean this term in two ways: first, driven by an understanding of their own history as sacred and revelatory, Biblical authors transmitted their oral traditions into written histories of recent events, and the collection grew chronologically over time. Second—and again resulting from their conception of history—these authors saw it as part of their given task to incorporate the historical narrative of previous texts, constantly reconfiguring those characters and events for a new audience and a new time. Many Biblical

characters, particularly the cast of Genesis, are therefore portrayed in conflicting ways over the course of Torah.

Such diverse portraits would not be presented to the modern reader were it not for the sense of urgency in the task of self-reflection for the authors of scripture. In his book *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi argues that “No more dramatic evidence is needed for the dominant place of history in ancient Israel than the overriding fact that even God is known only insofar as he reveals himself ‘historically.’”¹⁰ These authors invested in a project of history as theophany; they sought God through contemplation of His intervening acts in their own history. Each subsequent generation is called not only to invoke and recall these acts, then, but also to reconfigure them as relevant for the current time.

As a result of these varied tributes to Abraham and his descendants in Torah, no uniform picture emerges of the attitude of the ‘tradition’ towards the patriarchs. Some of the moments when authors invoke the patriarchs share a common context or purpose—for example, they often occur at times when a new generation is being blessed and situated among the tradition of forebears. Yet even when invoked for a common religious purpose, each Biblical school of thought appropriates the characters in a manner relevant to their own agenda. After the Book of Genesis, the character of Joseph is revisited in Deuteronomy 33 and Psalm 105. The scholar James Kugel notes, “...it is in any case striking that the ‘Joseph’ one encounters elsewhere in the Bible has little do with this literary hero [of Genesis] or the sagely virtues he embodies” (Kugel, *IPH*, 13). Since the later authors I am going to study—particularly the Hellenistic Jews—build on these particular inter-textual reflections on Joseph, in this chapter I will investigate the textual nuance of each perspective and the historical context it derived from.

¹⁰ Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992), 9.

Aiding me in this endeavor are biblical scholars who trace the various uses of the Joseph story in biblical and extra-biblical works. H.W. Hollander's essay "The Portrayal of Joseph in Hellenistic Jewish and Early Christian Literature" notes that although Joseph is presented in a primarily positive light in the original Genesis, the references to Joseph at other points in Jewish scripture do not always reflect that same portrayal.

¹¹ Kugel argues that in these inter-biblical references, Joseph accumulates a new identity, as "the great founder, the ancestor and progenitor, of the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh who lived in the North of Israel during much of the biblical period" (Kugel, *IPH*, 14-15). Some texts—particularly Deuteronomy—recall his heroic traits as they are described in Genesis, but because of the historical context in which the Deuteronomistic reflections occurred, Joseph's name becomes associated with a conflicted tribal history, as well as a conflicted editorial tradition. Hollander writes that at such a time, the "name of Joseph represented a geopolitical reality, which became a symbol of religious apostasy in the eyes of certain pious Israelites and Jews" (Hollander, 239).

Hollander touches on the multiple levels of intent written into this textual reflection on Joseph in Deuteronomy, as well as the multiple lenses through which these reflections were later viewed. To begin with, scholars believe that the Deuteronomistic corpus was edited during the Babylonian Exile, but date its composition earlier, during a period of expansion and prosperity for the kingdoms of Israel. ¹² Around the eighth century B.C.E., a probable date of composition for these works, Jerusalem expanded as the newly dissolved Northern Kingdom migrated south;

¹¹ H.W. Hollander, "The Portrayal of Joseph in Hellenistic Jewish and Early Christian Literature," *Biblical Figures Outside the Bible*, Ed. Michael Stone and Theodore Bergren, (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1998), 237.

¹² The Deuteronomistic Corpus includes Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, I and II Samuel, and I and II Kings.

a more symbiotic relationship between the traditionally warring groups developed, leading arguably to themes of patriotism and national revival in the Deuteronomistic texts.¹³ In later editing during the Babylonian Exile, however, redactors emphasized such uniting themes in light of the *loss* of the land. The editors grappling with the Exile were often nostalgic for Israel's former glory, while simultaneously engaged in the task of seeking evidence, amidst that glory, of disobedience to cult and God in the histories they collected. Steven McKenzie argues that their purpose was "to show...that their sufferings were the fully deserved consequences of centuries of decline in Israel's loyalty to YHWH" (McKenzie, 161). Richard Elliott Friedman summarizes the way in which the Deuteronomistic Historians handled their texts in his book *Who Wrote the Bible?:* their methodology "demonstrates the impact of the events of the ancient world on the way that the Bible's story came to be written."¹⁴

These multiple objectives play out on the specific level of the character of Joseph. I mentioned earlier that several moments of inter-biblical exegesis on the Genesis patriarchs take the form of a blessing; Joseph's appearance in Deuteronomy 33 is one such moment. According to Kent Harold Richards, blessings in the Torah at a time of family crisis affirm the "continuous favorable working of God."¹⁵ In other words, blessings passed on through human mouths strengthen family ties to the divine covenantal blessing. Joseph's mention occurs in the 'Blessing of Moses,' a later addition to the Deuteronomistic canon which re-construes Jacob's blessing to his twelve sons in Genesis 48, but in Moses's own words. One blessing cannot be understood

¹³ Steven L. McKenzie, "Deuteronomistic Historians," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Ed. David Noel Freedman, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), Volume II, 161.

¹⁴ Richard Elliott Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1987), 130.

¹⁵ Kent Harold Richards, "Blessing," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Ed. David Noel Freedman, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), Vol 1, 756.

without the other, and their differences are critical to understanding the development of historical conceptions of Joseph.

But first, it is equally critical to understand how the Blessing of Moses fits in to the complex context of Deuteronomistic textual production. This particular act of passing on the covenant, represented first in Genesis 48 and refigured in Deuteronomy 33, is colored by its addressees—and their position in the timeline of Israelite history. The inheritance by Jacob's sons of the Abrahamic blessing represents a key transition from the era of the patriarchs to the era of the tribes; it is a move from a father-son transferal of a covenant with an intimate family God, to a dissemination of this promise throughout an entire tribal people. Jacob's blessing is distinctly different from that bestowed upon Isaac by Abraham or upon Jacob by Isaac, and both texts who imagine it (Genesis and Deuteronomy) address each of Jacob's sons according to the subsequent history of his tribe. These composers sought to position each tribe in a contemporary hierarchy of favor and political advantage. But the hierarchies these authors alluded to shifted between the time of the production of Genesis and Deuteronomy, making the two representations of the Blessing of Jacob different.

At the crux of this transition to tribal politics lie Joseph and his two sons Ephraim and Manasseh. Joseph does not propagate a singular tribal history as do his eleven brothers—his tribe is split between his two sons, with their own complex tribal history—but the “House of Joseph” becomes synonymous with the Northern Kingdom. And here the composers, editors, and later readers of the text return to their multi-tiered conception of Israel and its history. The Deuteronomistic Historians themselves viewed the Northern Kingdom favorably, as it was recently reunited with its southern counterpart at the time they wrote (McKenzie, 161). As Hollander mentioned, the exiled redactors of the text, however, included the apostasy of the

Northern Kingdom in a growing list of Israel's fatal sins. Both viewpoints emerge in the Blessing of Moses, and scholars are unclear if one dominates. It is clear, however, that this invocation of Joseph—undertaken with an eye to its brother-text in Genesis 48—represents an attempt to define the place of Joseph's tribal legacy not only in relation to the tribes his brothers founded, but also in the greater history of Israel.

It is important to reiterate here that varying historical attitudes towards the tribe founded by the line of Joseph are integral to our understanding of how the Jewish 'tradition' has felt about Joseph himself. Centuries of interpreters have refused to separate the two, reading back into Joseph's own story predictions of his tribe's fate; after all, if history is theophany, then tribal narratives and patriarchal narratives are intimately bound. Therefore for the purposes of this project, let us draw such a link of our own: from a literary perspective, Joseph is the perfect son to represent the complex ties between the patriarchs and the tribes they generated, for his own story catalyzes a smaller but equally significant Israelite transition into Egypt. I mentioned in Chapter One that Joseph's name is not included in the standard invocation of the patriarchs "Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." In addition, the blessing of his sons Ephraim and Manasseh repeats the familiar pattern of the reversal of primogeniture, but in a strange context. As Jacob blesses Joseph's sons, he uses language to predict the future of their tribes (in lieu of a 'Joseph' tribe) just as he will in the blessing for the rest of his sons; in other words, Ephraim and Manasseh enter the world of the tribal system even before their uncles. This peculiarity can be explained within the context of the particular purpose of Jacob's blessing of Joseph's sons, which serves to re-legitimize Joseph back into the family—and, by implication, legitimize his assimilation in Egypt in marrying a foreign woman and having half-Egyptian children. As a transition into the context of the Book of Exodus, Joseph's narrative is apt. Friedman argues that Ephraim, Jacob's

grandson, is favored with Jacob's blessing because of the historical significance of the tribe of Ephraim in the writer's age: "Ephraim was *King Jeroboam's* tribe. Jeroboam's capital city, Shechem, was located in the hills of Ephraim. Ephraim, in fact, was used as another name for the kingdom of Israel" (Friedman, 65).

The actual blessing of Jacob in Genesis 49 to each of his sons favors Judah and Joseph above the other brothers in length; scholars attribute the prominence of Judah to the author's attempt to legitimize of the Davidic dynasty, derived from that tribe. Each son's blessing both condemns and commends the future history of their tribe, unlike the later, more laudatory, version in Deuteronomy. Joseph's blessing is ripe with the imagery of fertility and animalistic vigor: "Joseph is a wild ass, / a wild ass by a spring / --wild colts on a hillside" (Genesis 49:22). From a modern inter-textual perspective, this language seems to invoke the narrative of Joseph's life in Genesis—perhaps referring to his role as the savior of Israel from famine. His tribe is next portrayed as enduring violent assault: "Archers bitterly assailed him... Yet his bow stayed taut, / and his arms were made firm / By the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob" (Genesis 49:23-24). Scholars argue that this is also meant to reflect "the subsequent history of the tribe," but also note that the image of embattlement recalls the betrayal of Joseph's brothers—seemingly the sole moment in all of Jacob's blessing scholars link to the actual life story of the addressee.¹⁶

As the blessing claims, then, Joseph is indeed "elect" among his brothers (Genesis 49:26). That exact phrase appears in the recasting of this blessing in Deuteronomy 33; however, it is interpreted there very differently, reflecting the change in historical perspective and editorial intent. The *Jewish Study Bible* ties 'elect' to "a time when Joseph (the Northern Kingdom,

¹⁶ Berlin, Adele and Marc Zvi Brettler, Ed, *The Jewish Study Bible*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 98.

destroyed in 722 BCE) enjoyed greater prestige than Judah” (Berlin, 47). Indeed, Judah’s blessing in Deuteronomy is severely decreased in length, while Joseph’s remains prominent. The imagery of fertility associated with Joseph prevails from Genesis to this blessing (“Blessed of the Lord be his land...with the bounteous yield of the sun,” Deut. 33:13-14) Kugel argues that such language reflects the “relative lushness and fruitfulness of the land [the Northern Kingdom] that was Joseph’s inheritance” (Kugel, IPH, 15). The animalism prevails as well, but with a slightly different cast: “Like a firstling bull in his majesty, / He has horns like the horns of the wild-ox; / With them he gores the peoples” (Deut. 33:17). Where the Book of Genesis portrayed the Joseph tribe as embattled, here it is triumphant. Kugel also points out that the Northern Kingdom was often associated with an image of a bull, whose twin horns represented the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh: “via these two he is to eliminate other peoples from the region and extend his own power and influence ‘to the ends of the earth’” (Kugel, IPH, 15).

Joseph’s appearance in Deuteronomy reflects the complexity of not only the historical concerns of this textual school of thought, but also their varying tribal loyalties. It is important to note that although the text portrays Joseph’s associations with the Northern Kingdom positively here, on account of the historical moment behind these texts, the Northern Kingdom soon becomes linked with apostasy in the text. Joseph’s name re-emerges in later books such as Amos in the context of the decline of North-South relations and the Northern Kingdom’s eventual downfall—a theme more fully explored by the Rabbis (Kugel, 16). At this moment in Deuteronomy, however, the editors of the text seek to portray Joseph positively, not only for his own heroic life story but also for the initial strength of his tribe.

Outside of Deuteronomy, the other major passage in Torah which recalls the character of Joseph is the 105th Psalm. Although these verses are equally laden with their own context of

editorial intentions, Kugel argues that “nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible outside of Genesis do we encounter Joseph as the individual hero of the events of Egypt” (Kugel, *IPH*, 17). In other words, this is the only text which explicitly mentions the events of Joseph’s own life. Susan Docherty focuses on the imagery associated with Joseph in the psalm in her article, “Joseph the Patriarch: Representations of Joseph in Early Post-Biblical Literature.”¹⁷ She argues for a post-exilic composition in the third century B.C.E.; this context leads Docherty to assert that the psalm re-casts Joseph’s life story to prefigure the destiny of the nation of Israel (Docherty, 196). Kugel acknowledges the scholarly debate over the dating of the verses, pointing alternately to a strain of thought which places them in the *pre*-exilic period on the grounds that they are cited in 1 Chron 16:8-22 (Kugel, *IPH*, 16-17). Regardless of its origins, Psalm 105 undoubtedly emphasizes the connection between Joseph’s own life story and Exodus, and exaggerates his suffering in slavery to strengthen its counterpoint—his redemption and political ascension by God’s grace.

The Psalm includes an inter-textual link which is key to understanding the psalmist’s connection between Joseph and the history of Israel. Verse 17 claims that when God called a famine on the land of Egypt, “He sent ahead of them a man, / Joseph, sold into slavery” (Psalm 105: 17). As I discussed in Chapter One, in Genesis, when Joseph finally reveals himself in his regal position to his brothers long after their betrayal, he remarks: “And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life” (Genesis 45:5). Joseph believes that God sold him into slavery ultimately to feed the Egyptians (and his own family) in famine. The editors of the *Jewish Study Bible* argue that

¹⁷ Susan Docherty, “Joseph the Patriarch: Representations of Joseph in Early Post-Biblical Literature,” *Borders, Boundaries, and the Bible*, Ed. Martin O’Kane, (New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 194.

the purpose of Psalm 105 is to assure the postexilic audience “that they are entitled to the land of Israel by divine right,” and in fact it does so by walking its readers through the ways in which God “is ever mindful of His covenant” (Berlin, 1399; Psalm 105:8). Therefore the psalmist highlights the Joseph narrative because it leads to the protection of Israel from famine; which leads to the nation’s prosperity in Egypt, which leads to their enslavement, which leads to Exodus and their entry into the land. Joseph represents one link in a long chain of events, and the psalmist indicates this by citing Joseph’s own belief in God’s plan, enacted in the triumphs and trials of his life. This is an example of an appropriation of Joseph’s story to assure a suffering audience of the divine plan, and a particular viewpoint which Mann responds to.

Verse 18 reads “His feet were subjected to fetters; / an iron collar was put on his neck” (Psalm 105:18). In this direct reference to the pathos of Joseph’s slavery, the psalmist could be empathizing with an audience suffering in exile in order that they might relate to Joseph and thus believe in eventual divine redemption. Kugel summarizes the lesson of the psalmist: “The great divine plan could hardly have seemed evident to Joseph at such a moment, yet he trusted in ‘the word of the Lord’ and his situation was reversed” (Kugel, *IPH*, 17). This connection is also attempted in verse 16, where God is described as destroying “every staff of bread” in famine (Psalm 105:16). The editors of the *Jewish Study Bible* interject that this phrase, ‘staff of bread’ was commonly used in connection with “the famine that results from enemy sieges...forming another link between the forefathers’ experience and that of the exiles” (Berlin, 1400). In sum, the texts within the Hebrew Bible that revisit the story of Joseph do so in specific historical contexts; their tribal and exilic perspectives cause his character to accrete additional meaning and, potentially, additional versatility for non-canonical exegetes.

In tracking the forward movement of the Hebrew Bible in its finally redacted form, we watch in ‘real time’ as the figure of Joseph is remembered and newly realized for the competing agendas of different textual schools of thought. In turning to the Christian scriptures, a similar process occurs. The New Testament capitalized precisely on the versatility of Joseph’s character, available to be employed for lessons on morality tailored to any number of audiences. Yet these Christian authors received the character of Joseph in this fully developed form—from the books of Genesis, Deuteronomy, and the Psalms—and thus re-appropriated him in a manner corresponding to the whole, not just Genesis. Reflections on Joseph in the Book of Acts and the Letter to the Hebrews characterize the complex Christian relationship to the Jewish scriptures and associate the character of Joseph with even more layers of meaning.

Hollander argues that the New Testament recalls the Joseph story largely for the purpose of casting him as a prototype for Jesus (Hollander, 237). Not only is his life story one of suffering, but his brothers can be portrayed conveniently as disbelievers—ancestors of the Jews who refused to believe in Jesus—while Joseph can easily be painted as an ethical model. In the Book of Acts, this is manifested as “an attack on the conduct of the people of Israel and their leaders;” in Hebrews, it emerges as an image of Joseph as the only one who understands God’s plan (Hollander, 253). These texts represent a new level of ‘displacement’ within an emerging religious tradition; their contribution of the ‘suffering’ portrayal of Joseph is central to Mann’s development of his character. Mann employs an allegory to the life of Jesus Christ in the mythological dimension of his project.

The Book of Acts was likely composed around the year 80 C.E. for a Greek-speaking, Christian gentile audience. It is presented as a continuation of the Gospel of Luke; in the redaction of the New Testament, Acts was separated in order to keep all four gospels together.

Stephen's speech referencing Joseph in the seventh chapter draws upon the implications of the Pentateuch narrative for a Christian audience; his argument represents a microcosm of the Luke author's wider schematic, "which regards the *narration* as critical to historical argument."¹⁸ Here we remember the Jewish scriptural relationship with the events of history; ancient authors sought God through examining the narratives of their own people. This insight can be applied to the content of Stephen's speech, which—along with the rest of the Jerusalem narrative in chapters 1-7 of Acts—seeks to assure its gentile audience of the relevance and validity of God's covenant to the Jews for their own faith. Stephen's vehicle for this argument is the central narrative of Israel, beginning with Abraham.

Stephen's appearance before the Sanhedrin functions for the New Testament as a deductive proof of the Christian church as Israel refigured and restored. The twelve tribes of Israel become the twelve apostles of Jesus. So what is Joseph's role in this argument? To the Sanhedrin, Stephen must answer two charges: first, that he spoke out against the "holy place" or the temple—in other words, he blasphemed God; second, that he spoke out against the law—he blasphemed Torah. His response to the second charge explains his turn to the Pentateuch narrative and Joseph; he ultimately argues that Jesus completes the Mosaic law laid out in these ancient texts.

To convince his audience, Stephen must first emphasize the 'delayed gratification' of the Abrahamic covenant, demonstrating that God's promises to the patriarchs were not filled in their lifetimes, but in Jesus Christ and the Church. Next, he must accuse his audience of rejecting the prophets of their own tradition and thus misunderstanding the true nature of God's message. Here Joseph's story is highlighted, as he—as well as Moses, Stephen points out—was cast out by

¹⁸ Wesley I. Toews, "Luke-Acts," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Ed. David Noel Freedman, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), Volume 4, 405.

his own people, only managing to fulfill his destiny through God's grace: "The patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him, and rescued him from all his afflictions" (Acts 7:9-10).¹⁹

What is remarkable about Stephen's speech is its deceptively benign build-up to a sudden and scathing criticism of Jews who had not accepted Jesus. It is only after reading "you stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do" that we must reconsider Stephen's leisurely retelling of the well-known Torah narrative (Acts 7:51). Through this retrospective lens Stephen's criticisms rise to the surface; among them, we can see that Stephen compares Jews who refused to believe in Jesus to Joseph's resentful brothers. Therefore despite having drawn on sources shared with the Jews, Stephen lays the groundwork for understanding Joseph as a prototype for Jesus.

The Letter to the Hebrews is a homiletic text which dates around 95 C.E. and relies extensively on what Christians refer to as the 'Old Testament.' The authors pursue a similar comparison between the covenant of Christ and the Judaic covenant, but unlike Stephen and the Sanhedrin, their goal is not a polemic against Judaism. Instead, Hebrews addresses a split internal to an audience of Christians who have endured severe persecution. The scholar Harold W. Attridge refers to the eleventh chapter of Hebrews as "an encomium on faith," whose function is "to strengthen a community of believers in Christ in the face of opposition."²⁰ Chapter Eleven is liturgically repetitive in cadence, explaining the endurance of Jewish and Christian forefathers "by faith." The characters described as enduring by this 'faith' suffer

¹⁹ Michael D. Coogan, et al., Ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 3rd Ed, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). I use this translation for any quotations from the New Testament following.

²⁰ Harold W. Attridge, "The Letter to the Hebrews," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Ed. David Noel Freedman, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), Volume 3, 99-100.

alienation and physical pain; Jesus masters and epitomizes faith by his martyrdom. These early figures for Jesus include Joseph. The authors explore the role of each Genesis character in the cumulative history of Israel, and like Stephen, elevate these characters' faith in a future fulfillment of a covenant unrealized in their own lifetime.

In a fascinating turn, the specific mention of Joseph in this schematic recalls the blessing motif evoked in Joseph's appearances in the Christian Old Testament. The text reads: "By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, 'bowing in worship over the top of his staff.' By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave instructions about his burial" (Hebrews 11:21-22). First of all, Ephraim and Manasseh—who play such crucially complex roles at this moment in Torah—are not mentioned by name; the preference is given to Joseph. Secondly, the quotation marks around "bowing in worship over the top of his staff" apparently refer to Genesis 47:31, "...then Israel bowed himself on the head of his bed." The referent for the author of Hebrews is the Septuagint, which uses the Greek word *proskenesis* for "bow," possibly having a connotation of worship, but not definitively; the author of Hebrews makes a surprising cognitive leap to portray Jacob as "bowing in worship" to the sons of Joseph. This particular interpretation could imply that the authors of the Book of Hebrews favor the tribal legacy of their source texts over the patriarchal ancestry. Arguably, such an attitude lines up thematically with the futuristically inclined view of Hebrews; in other words, they portray each Genesis figure as faithfully acting towards a future they cannot see. Verse 22 supports this argument, portraying Joseph as the one who foresaw the Israelites' return to the land of Canaan at his death.

At the close of scripture for both Jewish and Christian audiences, then, Joseph's character had taken on additional cultural and religious meaning. This Joseph, and not merely the already

complex Joseph of the Genesis story, then, was presented to interpreters, whose own versions of his life added new epithets and traditions to be passed on to later generations. For this thesis, these early inter-biblical reflections on Joseph demonstrate the ambiguity surrounding the confrontation with time for interpreters: are Joseph's actions to be understood as helping to catalyze and bring about God's ultimate plan—meaning they should be studied and imitated—or are they merely narrated for literary merit? For the Christian authors of Acts and Hebrews who believe in Jesus, no suffering is insignificant; Joseph joins a cast of prototypical characters rejected by their own people but ultimately doing God's work and 'keeping the faith' that their actions *do* have a purpose. The author of the 105th Psalm has a similar view of Joseph, though within the context of the fate of the nation of Israel; the events of Joseph's life are to be understood as indications that God is working towards the salvation of his people from exile. Although the authors of Deuteronomy do not address this ambiguity directly, their invocation of Jacob's blessing to Joseph recalls his transitional function, which in itself is a causal mentality; the story of Joseph's life brings about a chain of events which are by their nature divinely ordained. Each text explores a role for Joseph; Thomas Mann capitalizes on the versatility of Joseph's character in order to deepen the scope of his project.

Chapter Three: Joseph in *Midrash*

In the last chapter I examined exegesis on the Joseph story within the Bible itself, noting how such interpretation was driven primarily by historical concerns. In turning to the ‘classic’ methods of interpretation developed over centuries by the Rabbis, I study the project of interpretation as it is understood within a religious tradition, even within their sacred canon. Just as the character of Joseph developed over the course of sacred text, he developed further through sacred interpretation. The practice of *midrash* by early Jewish Rabbis was adopted in order to create a relationship between a people of faith and their sacred canon—in short, to build a theology through interpretive engagement. The *midrash* of the Rabbis, then, serves as a way to approach ‘displaced’ sacred text. Their project is deeply significant for pioneering a methodology of hermeneutics, and provides the kinetic energy for generations of interpreters. Mann pays tribute to their mastery in adopting their exegetical techniques—at times, I might argue, engaging his own narrative voice in conversation as the Rabbis do with one another—and in using their narrative imagination as a springboard for his own.

I denote Rabbinic *midrash* as ‘classic’ and, for my purposes, foundational in relation to the other early works I am studying because, for the most part, their reflection is motivated theologically instead of culturally; in other words, since Rabbinic *midrash* engages in conversation across centuries on the same page and even verse of text, it is largely liberated from culture-specific concerns and seeks to instruct a holistic faith. Jacob Neusner, the author of the translation of *Genesis Rabbah* I am using, writes in his introduction: “The interest and importance of their reading of Genesis transcend the age in which the sages did their work. For how the great Judaic sages of that time taught the interpretation of the stories of Genesis would

guide later Judaic exegetes of the same biblical book”²¹ The Rabbis’ project is also presented on the page as an ongoing conversation between many different points of view, meaning that the commentators embrace argument and contradiction. This makes their interpretive approach distinctly accretive, as opposed to exclusionary—in other words, whereas the other exegetes I study seek to promote a particular (and historically motivated) view of Joseph’s life, the Rabbis gather many different views in one place. Although one could certainly study *midrash* as a collection of distinct, historically-motivated interpretations by individuals, I wish to study the more purely theological concerns which rise in common (and in contrast) out of this conversation. In grasping the theological intentions behind their commentary, then, I can trace the appropriation of such concepts in culture-specific contexts of interpretation.

The manner in which the Rabbis came to embark on their project of exegesis relates to my discussion of sacred history in the previous chapter. The Rabbinic period marks a key transition in Jewish textual production. In Chapter Two, I studied the long-established tradition of historiographies which search for God’s hand in contemporary events. This tradition eventually shifted with the close of the scriptural canon, and writers responded to the challenge of becoming a holy people, looking back at the scriptures for relevant insight. This shift corresponded with a new conception of sacred time for the Jewish people, exemplified in the establishment of a circular liturgical calendar, contrasted with the linear model of time in the Bible.

In James Kugel’s words in “Two Introductions to *Midrash*,” during the Biblical period “God’s power is seen to manifest itself uniquely in one-time events that, having happened,

²¹ Jacob Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis. A New American Translation*. Vol. III: Parashiyot Sixty-Eight through One Hundred on Genesis 28:10 to 50:26, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), x.

change things forever: ‘You were slaves in Egypt, I led you out; now you are free men.’”²² This “peculiarly Israelite feeling of *consequentiality*, the unflagging consciousness of how events in the past *create* the present” resulted in a concept of time as linear, relentlessly marching forward (Kugel, 2Intros, 85). Zornberg and others argue for the presence of such a feeling in the original Genesis text, as I explored in Chapter One. Although such a causal mentality has never fully disappeared, it became untenable in the political turmoil of the post-exilic world. Finding it difficult to discern God’s work in the confused events of their own lifetime, exegetes were unable to support this ‘consequential’ modality in linear fashion, thus:

That whole space of time which was biblical history became, as it were, bracketed. The Bible’s time was *other* time, discontinuous with later events and yet, because of its special character, one which was constantly about to impose its mark on the present...The reading of the Torah’s history itself because cyclical, indeed, eventually an annual event: Creation, Exodus, Sinai, and Moses’ death were regular occurrences.

(Kugel, 2Intros, 89)

Kugel’s explanation of the new liturgical calendar helps explain the sheer volume of exegesis on these pivotal moments of the Hebrew canon. If, as he argues, “the ups and downs of political or daily life are conceded to His control without usually being held up to inspection,” then one must inspect scripture all the more closely for meaning (Kugel, 2Intros, 90). The practice of re-examining, for example, the lives of the patriarchs at appointed times of the year is an intriguing shift. It indicates that Jewish communities were called upon not only to relate the stories of the Pentateuch to their own lives, but by implication examine the conduct of the characters as

²² James L. Kugel, “Two Introductions to *Midrash*,” *Midrash and Literature*, Ed. G.H. Hartman and S. Budick, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 84.

parable. Undoubtedly, this contributed to the development of new conceptions of Joseph as a moral model.

The Rabbis invite their audience to immerse themselves in the world of Scripture entirely. Their project is interpretation. As the Babylonian Talmud poeticizes, “ ‘Is not my word like...a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?’ (Jer 23:28) As the hammer splits the rock into many splinters, so will a scriptural verse yield many meanings.’”²³ In this sense, *midrash* reopens the closed doors of the canon, entering through ‘surface irritants’ in the text to fill in textual spaces with boundless imagination.

The Rabbis operate on the basic assumption that God intended multiple meanings behind each cryptic verse of scripture (Kugel, 2Intros, 81). The assumption stretches from the range of possibility inherent in the Hebrew language—a lack of both vowels and punctuation allows for a myriad of interpretations—to the exegetic opportunity in the form of literary parallelism used in the Bible, often referred to as ‘bicolons.’²⁴ Particularly in the verses of poems such as the Psalms, each phrase contains a repetition. For example, in the 105th Psalm which speaks of Joseph: “The king sent and released him; / the ruler of the people set him free. / He made him lord of his house, / and ruler of all his possessions” (Psalm 105:20-21). The second half of each bicolon restates the meaning of the first in a new way, often introducing a new metaphor. Besides the advantage this structure affords for oral recitation in its rhythmic cadence, it also produces natural dualities of meaning; the Rabbis argue that the second repetition begs a fresh interpretation of the verse.

²³ Jacob Shachter and H. Freedman, trans.; Ed. Rabbi Dr. I Epstein. *Babylonian Talmud: Sanhedrin*. ‘Come and Hear.’ http://www.come-and-hear.com/sanhedrin/sanhedrin_34.html. 11 March 2009.

²⁴ The modern study of biblical parallelism began with Bishop Robert Lowth’s seminal work *De Sacra Poesi Hebraeorem Praelectiones Academicae* (Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews – 1753).

Kugel notes that the basic unit of *midrash* is the verse: “one of the things this means is that each verse of the Bible is in principle as connected to its most distant fellow as to the one next door...indeed, the *midrashist* sometimes delights in the remoter source” (Kugel, 2Intros, 93). In other words, the Rabbis often use the method of inter-biblical exegesis, explaining one verse through another unrelated one. The Rabbis’ project is aptly called ‘serious play’; although the breadth of interpretation that becomes possible from these basic assumptions seems problematic, the Rabbis embrace contradiction and argument, both as a starting point in the sacred text and in their endless conversations with each other. This point cannot be stressed enough. I wish to study the methodology of these masters in order to shed light on both the interpretive act and how it influenced the later exegetes I study; I do not search for general conclusions on the Rabbis’ perceptions of Joseph—given their internal arguments, such a task would be impossible. Kugel points to their focus on the unit of the verse for this concept: “...with the exception of certain patterns, these ‘bits’ are rather atomistic, and...interchangeable, modifiable, combinable—in short, not part of an overall exegesis at all” (Kugel, 2Intros, 95).

Genesis Rabbah, redacted between the fourth and fifth centuries C.E., represents one major body of *midrash* on the Book of Genesis collected during the transition from pagan to Christian rule in the Roman Empire. Just as the redactors of Biblical texts grappled with a monumental shift in their circumstances with the Babylonian Exile, the Rabbis who edited *Genesis Rabbah* sought to situate “the meaning of the new and ominous turn of history” in their own lives (Neusner, ix). Despite the contentious conversation inherent in the Rabbis’ project, it is possible to discern a set of larger theological intentions—questions they seek to answer—behind their methodology and dialogue. The broadest and perhaps most influential of these intentions is to demonstrate and discover the divine plan at work in the text. The Rabbis often

answer textual problems by tightening the connections both within and without the text they examine, for example by pointing out how one early moment foreshadows another, or bringing in an intertextual link from another book to illuminate the meaning of a verse. They also read each story, and each individual verse, to discover its greater implications in the history of the Israelites, sometimes by lending a voice to the gaps in the text. The scholar Isaac Kalimi restates this greater intention as preserving the “integrity and accuracy of heavenly judgment.”²⁵ Kalimi’s words seem to imply that the Rabbis will go to great length to *prove* the existence of (and prudence of) the divine plan behind each verse; although they are certainly imaginative to an often comic point, such cynicism becomes irrelevant once you accept their premise, which allows them such fantastic latitude in their imagination. In Neusner’s words:

We may restate the conviction of the framers of the document: We now know what will be then, just as Jacob had told his sons, just as Moses had told the tribes, because everything exists under the aspect of a timeless will, God’s will, and all things express one thing, God’s program and plan. Our task as Israel is to accept, endure, submit, and celebrate....in the polemical and pointed statements of the exegete-compositors of Genesis Rabbah, we confront the theology of history. (Neusner, ix)

This is no small presumption. If the Rabbis operate by faith under the assumption that God created scripture to lay out his plan, but also that He made it intentionally cryptic, then surely even their most implausible explanations for His works fall miserably short of the truth. Their meticulous focus on the nuance behind each verse suggests their belief in the prevalence or

²⁵ Isaac Kalimi, *Early Jewish Exegesis and Theological Controversy: Studies in Scriptures in the Shadow of Internal and External Controversies*, (Assen: Koninklijke Van Gorcum BV, 2002), 102.

omnipresence of the divine plan, which has implications for their understanding of Joseph's story.

The Rabbis engage in 'serious play', then, with a deep and compelling understanding of the inadequacy of their own human convictions about sacred text. They position themselves in awe of the text, just as the Hellenistic interpreters I study next did. Even in 'displacement', the text is sacrosanct. Mann, while owing a great intellectual debt to the fruits of this kind of posturing towards Genesis, later breaches this inviolability of the text in assuming a position of cognitive superiority to the text. The other major driving force behind the conversation of *Genesis Rabbah* and other *midrash* seeks to answer general theological questions regarding the character of God or a moral message—questions in the same category as demonstrating divine will in the text, but unafraid to question it.

As I mentioned in the introduction, the Rabbis engage in conversation across centuries, freeing their motivations from culture-specific concerns and allowing their mastery to have a more lasting influence on later exegetes. Jacob Neusner supports my analysis and argues it himself, but simultaneously argues that culture and time-specific concerns *do* emerge occasionally in the redaction of *Genesis Rabbah*. In the "work of selection and ordering...and only in that aspect of the work before us, [we find] our point of entry into the mind and imagination of the composers of *Genesis Rabbah*" (Neusner, xii). He argues, in fact, that this editorial voice, evidenced in the way the text appears to us structurally, is the only coherent message of the Rabbis. It is important to note that the work is influenced by its historical context in the Roman Empire, but these influences do not affect its efficacy as a study of the act of exegesis.

In the Joseph cycle and the episode with Potiphar's wife, the Rabbis focus on finding divine intentionality in the suffering of Joseph. Their inquiry operates on two levels: first, that Joseph deserved his later misfortunes by acting immorally towards his brothers; second, that Joseph's sufferings brought about greater transitions in the history of the Israelites. With regard to Joseph's interaction with Potiphar's wife, they add a moral layer onto what appears as an issue of property rights in the original text for these purposes; their methods are primarily intertextual, tightening the connections between moments both internal and external to the Genesis story.

For example, the Rabbis expand Genesis 37:2, "...At seventeen years of age, Joseph tended the flocks with his brothers, as a helper to the sons of his father's wives Bilhah and Zilpah. And Joseph brought bad reports of them to their father." First the exegetes imagine what gossip Joseph carried to his father, ranging from the accusation that they improperly eat limbs "cut from living beasts" (Rabbi Meir) to "They insult the sons of the handmaidens and they call them slaves" (Rabbi Judah). A later interpretation drives the point home: "Rabbi Judah bar Simon said, 'In all three cases: 'A just balance and scale are the Lord's' (Prov. 16:11)" (Neusner, 188 2E). Jumping off from this intertextual point that Joseph will get what is coming to him, the Rabbi proceeds to demonstrate how God punished Joseph appropriately for each piece of gossip; for example: "[God continues,] 'You have said, 'They insult the sons of the handmaidens and they call them slaves.' 'Joseph was sold as a slave' (Psalm 105:17)" (Neusner, 188 2F).

One strain expands the moment when Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery, both to emphasize the pathos of his suffering and the elements which foreshadow the later events in Egypt. The Rabbis connect the journey to Hebron that Joseph embarks upon to seek out his brothers to "a step to Israel's ultimate servitude in Egypt" (Neusner, 193 5C). Their method is again intertextual; Abraham was buried in Hebron, and they recall God's words to Abraham in

Genesis 15:13: “Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years.” Thus although one Rabbi emphasizes Joseph’s own complicity in the events, the betrayal of his brothers is seen as setting a larger—necessary—event in motion. Even as some blame Joseph for sullyng his brothers’ name, other exegetes sympathize with his plight. For example, when the brothers return to deceive their father into thinking Joseph was killed, and Jacob laments “a wild beast has devoured him,” (Gen 37:33) one Rabbi comments: “ ‘a wild beast has devoured him’ refers to the wife of Potiphar” (Neusner, 199 4C).

The *midrash* on Genesis 37:28 presents a fascinating example of a moment when the Rabbis question God, or at least lament His mystery. The text explains how and to whom Joseph’s brothers sold him; the first Rabbi, Joshua ben Boethus, exclaims: “It is written, ‘O Lord, why do you make us err from your ways and harden our heart from your fear?’ (Isaiah 58:17)” (Neusner, 198 1C). The exegete is referencing the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart by God to the suffering of his people in Exodus, another seemingly cruel act of God only understood in its ramifications for the larger scheme of the fate of Israel. Another *midrashic* voice responds: “When you wanted, you put it in their heart to love, and when you wanted, you put it in their heart to hate” (Neusner, 198 1 C,D). In these words are echoed the suffering which results from the seemingly fickle character of God, and his almost arbitrary moments of overt intervention in the text.

Joseph’s adventures in Egypt are extensively interpreted in *Genesis Rabbah*. Another moment of foreshadowing is found in the double meaning of the Hebrew for ‘taken down’—as in “Joseph was taken down to Egypt” (Gen 39:1)—which also has the connotation of “subdue,” as Joseph is to have dominion over the Egyptians (Neusner, 220 1A-D). One interpretive strain

emphasizes the morality of Joseph, since Potiphar's house is blessed by God on account of the slave's presence. Indeed, the exegetes note that Joseph brought the presence of God down to Egypt, but wonder: "Was God with Joseph and not with the other tribal ancestors?" (Neusner, 220 3A; 223 1B). To this crucial question another Rabbi tells a parable of a stray cow carrying wine who wanders into a gentile's store, so the shepherd abandons his herd to follow the one cow; when asked why, the shepherd expresses concerns that the gentile will touch the wine and "turn it into libation-wine," i.e. ruin it for drinking (Neusner, 223 1C-E). In other words, Joseph is in the land of the foreigner and must be protected by God. As I discussed in Chapter One, these questions return to the issue of whether God only protects his 'blessed' among the Abrahamic family, who are excused from punishment for wrong-doing.

During these episodes in Egypt, the Rabbis seem to emphasize Joseph's morality. For example, one imagines that Joseph goes about Potiphar's house whispering Torah-teachings (Neusner, 224 1A-F). These motifs help explain why Potiphar leaves Joseph in charge of everything in his household. The Genesis text reads: "having [Joseph,] [Potiphar] had no concern for anything but the bread which he ate" (Gen 39:4-6); one Rabbi notes ominously, "'The bread that he ate' is a euphemism [for his wife]" (Neusner, 225 3B).

When the Rabbis reach the point in the text where Potiphar's wife turns her eyes on Joseph, the first move they make is to link her words with a passage in Proverbs 7:6-20:

From the window of my house...I looked out / and saw among the simple, / noticed
among the youths, / a lad devoid of sense...A woman comes toward him / dressed like a
harlot, with set purpose...Brazenly she says to him, ...I have come out to you, / seeking
you, and have found you. / I have decked my couch with covers / Of dyed Egyptian

linen...Let us drink our fill of love till morning; / Let us delight in amorous embrace. /
 For the man of the house is away; / He is off on a distant journey.

Although this passage from Proverbs is styled as an anonymous warning to avoid the seduction of a foreign woman, the Rabbis read Joseph's plight into it. Rabbi Levi explains that the 'young man without sense' refers to Joseph—without sense “for he repeated gossip about his brothers” (Neusner, 227 1E). The Rabbi cast the 'woman' as Potiphar's wife and 'the simple' as the tribal ancestors. The editor, Jacob Neusner, interjects to try and explain this move, saying: “I see no way in which the intersecting verse clarifies a point relevant to the base verse, but the net effect is to underline the situation confronting Joseph. *It is of his own doing* [emphasis added]” (Neusner, 228). Emphasizing Neusner's point that the Rabbis are trying to prove that “God's justice is exact,” another exegete refers to Psalm 125:3: “For the rod of wickedness shall not rest upon the lot of the righteous,” explaining that the 'rod of wickedness' refers to Potiphar's wife; in other words, Joseph was *not* righteous and deserved what he got (Neusner, 228 2B). Another Rabbi is even more explicit after his invocation of a similar passage in Job 34, saying “We shall now review how exactly the Holy One, blessed be he, repaid Joseph for his stupid and malicious talk against his brothers” (Neusner, 229 1C).

In order to accomplish this, some exegetes return to Jacob's favoritism of Joseph in his childhood. After laying out Joseph's response to Potiphar's wife in Genesis 39:7-9, one Rabbi remarks “There was a measure of rueful reflection here” and the others imagine what exactly occurred in his mind during the pause (Neusner, 230 1B). One puts words in Joseph's mouth, imagining him reflect on his spoiled childhood when “my father would see what portion was best and would set it before me”; the other puts a response in God's mouth: “These are really exercises in self-indulgence...I shall sick a she-bear [Potiphar's wife] against you [and we'll see

what reflections you have then]” (Neusner, 230 1D-E). Another Rabbi imagines God telling Joseph that he will inflict trials upon him “more arduous” than any his father or grandfather had suffered—given the *aqedah*, this is a strong statement (Neusner, 230 2B).

In a fascinating interpretation, one strain in fact connects Joseph’s situation to Abraham’s sacrifice in the *aqedah* of Genesis 22. The Rabbi imagines Joseph’s response to Potiphar’s wife, saying “It is the custom of the Holy One...to choose the most precious of the house of my father to serve as a burnt-offering...Should I then listen to you? But perhaps I have been chosen as a burnt offering, and through you I may be rendered unfit to serve as an offering” (Neusner, 231 2A-C). This interpretation places additional responsibility on the ‘chosen’ line to remain morally upright in case one is required as a ritual sacrifice to God, and implies that one’s status as ‘chosen’ guarantees that you will be tested. Other Rabbis follow this line of thought, interpreting Joseph’s refusal of Potiphar’s wife as because of his worry that he will not be fit for his destiny whenever God calls upon him—a strong reminder of the absence of God’s voice in the text. He is afraid of what the punishment for “having sexual relations with a married woman” would be given that, in the Rabbis’ words, “The first man was driven out of the Garden of Eden on account of violating a religious duty of a minor order” (Neusner, 232 4C). In a distinct parallel to the narrative of his father Jacob, Joseph also frets that he will lose his birthright because Jacob took it away from Reuben for having improper relations with Bilhah (Neusner, 232 5B). The Rabbis are concerned with Joseph’s standing before God and refer to the experiences of his ancestors for precedent.

One interpreter’s evaluation of Joseph’s response in Genesis 39:7-9 demonstrates the exegete’s view of Joseph’s autonomy from God. Rabbi Huna echoes my own query in Chapter One about Joseph’s evocation of both his master and his God, wondering: “Would something

important been left out of the verse, had the word ‘against God’ not been written?” His answer, however, makes the Rabbi’s point of view clear: “But ‘against God’ is written with letters that can be read, ‘No! by God!’ And that is the reply: ‘By God! I shall not do this terrible thing’” (Neusner, 233 9B). Rabbi Huna’s interpretation joins many others in this text which argue that Joseph’s primary obligation was to his God.

I also mentioned in Chapter One that Joseph’s story is analogous to the Book of Esther in seriously contemplating the implications of ‘life among the other.’ The Rabbis of *Genesis Rabbah* call upon the Book of Esther to compare Joseph to another Jew who succeeded, against the odds, among foreigners: Mordecai. Faced with Genesis 39:10 (“And although she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her...”), Rabbinic interpreters link the verse to Esther 3:4, in which Mordecai refuses to respond or listen to courtiers who question why he will not obey the king’s commandment. Other interpreters extend the parallel, noting, for example, that as Pharaoh eventually places his ring on Joseph’s finger, so the king gives Mordecai his ring; in other words, both rise to extremely high rank (Neusner, 233 1D). Neusner interjects to argue that this allusion to Mordecai “permits the exegete to draw a parallel between the life of Joseph and the history of Israel” (Neusner, 234). Later in the text, other Rabbis make a similar move, also with the intent of demonstrating Joseph’s merit. Pointing out that Joseph flees from the scene of seduction, Simeon of Qitron argues: “It was on account of bringing up the bones of Joseph that the sea was split: ‘The sea saw it and fled’ (Psalm 114:3), on the merit of this: ‘...and fled and got out’” (Neusner, 235 1C). This quirky intertextual link alludes to the Book of Exodus, when the Israelites bring Joseph’s bones with them out of Egypt, through the miraculously split Red Sea; Joseph’s choice, in other words, helped save his descendants at a later moment of crisis.

Several Rabbis engage in a heated debate over whether Joseph intended to give in to the seduction of Potiphar's wife or not. At stake in this conversation is the portrait many interpreters have built up thus far of Joseph as a moral model. The first strain, accepting as fact that Joseph was not tempted, I already quoted in Chapter One: a woman asks Rabbi Yose if it is possible that Joseph—being young and hot-blooded—could have resisted the woman's advances, and the Rabbi presents her with the Book of Genesis, arguing that scripture does not protect the reader from the lust of characters such as Reuben or Judah. He concludes: "Joseph...would have been revealed as lustful, had he done what the lady thought he had" (Neusner, 234 4B). The author of this anecdote seeks to affirm the authenticity of the text, assuming that if the text does not mention that Joseph was tempted, then he was not. Other Rabbis beg to differ, aligning this moment with many other 'silent' spaces of the text; they imagine that Joseph attempted to lie with the woman, but could not for various reasons. Mann later capitalizes on these very interpretations in his novel *Joseph in Egypt*. Several Rabbis ponder the meaning of the words "he went into the house to do his work and *none of the men of the house was there* [emphasis added]" in the text (Gen 39:10). The first argues that "[Joseph] actually tried [to sleep with her], but found that he was not a man;" in other words, he found himself sexually incapable (Neusner, 235 2B). The second supports this argument by referencing, interestingly, the Jacob's blessing to Joseph in Genesis 49, which states "...and his bow returned in strength" (Gen. 49:24). A third exegete employs the same method with a varying explanation of Joseph's sexual incompetence in the moment; the fourth again uses the conclusion of verse 24 in Jacob's blessing of Genesis 49 ("By the hands of the mighty one of Jacob...") to posit that Joseph saw his father's face before him, and "his blood cooled off" (Neusner, 235 2D-E). All of these exegetes do not hesitate to assert that Joseph was guilty. Yet even just a few verses later, the other Rabbis who comment on

Joseph's time in prison re-imagine this very conversation between Joseph and Potiphar's wife, and contradict their peers in arguing that Joseph countered each of the woman's threats with a corresponding verse from the Psalms.

In a thread which applies particularly to my later study of the Hellenistic novella *Joseph and Aseneth* as well as Mann's depiction of Joseph's marriage, several Rabbis attempt to exonerate Potiphar from blame in Joseph's fate. They imagine that he believes Joseph is innocent, but condemns him "so as not to cast infamy on my children" (Neusner, 236 2B). Neusner explains that these exegetes wish to treat him honorably since "they will later insist that Joseph married Potiphar's daughter, so they make every effort to include exculpatory materials" (Neusner, 236). Joseph's marriage to Aseneth is an overt problem in the text for the Rabbis, so linking her to the mostly upright figure of Potiphar fits their agenda.

The conversation which emerges in these pages turns on the central anxieties of the Genesis text, and does not resolve into a coherent theological scheme. It does, however, develop our understanding of the ambiguities at the heart of the original sacred text, and thus at the heart of the developing role of Joseph. The Rabbis weave back and forth between arguing that God is most certainly orchestrating the events of Joseph's life and conversely, heightening the sense of consequentiality in the narrative, which instead implies that Joseph's own actions play a heavier hand in God's plan. For example, one Rabbi interprets the change of heart in Joseph's brothers as God's doing, since he hardens and softens Pharaoh's heart seemingly at whim in Exodus—implying God's iron control of the situation. Another conversation questions this, in the theologically laden query "Was God with Joseph and not the other tribal ancestors?" (Neusner, 223 1B). The answer given to this question—that God must be with Joseph since he is among the Gentiles and thus in particular danger—not only recalls the anxiety of 'life among the other,' but

also logically leads to the opposite side of this ambiguity. Joseph is presumably in particular danger because his actions, among the other, could have devastating consequences; again and again in the Rabbis' conversations we see them strive to establish Zornberg's "consequentiality" of the narrative, connecting the pieces of *both* Joseph's triumphs and failures to later effects.

The repeated use of this interpretive technique leads me to believe that many of the Rabbis do not dwell on the 'what if' of Joseph's narrative. In other words, they may believe that Joseph himself felt free to make one choice or the other, but they argue retrospectively that the precise combination of his mistakes and achievements led to the precise events God intended them to; whether this implies that some believe God enacted both sides of Joseph's life is ambiguous. Behind this unresolved question is an exegetic tension between the two portraits of Joseph in Potiphar's house: one Joseph is most certainly guilty, and the other is a paradigm of virtue. In the guilty model, Joseph seems more akin to his brothers; in the virtuous one, he seems set apart. In *midrashim*, the polarities in the interpretation of the Joseph story merely widen and the ambiguities become all the more ambivalent. The Rabbis' conversation, then, prepares the way for first, the study of authors whose own exilic situation causes them to apply these questions to serious consideration of 'life among the other.' Second, their work catalyzes and inspires the boundless imagination of Thomas Mann, but stands in telling contrast to the bold, decisive narrative choices of his portrayal, re-emphasizing the very sacred and thus mysterious nature of their textual displacement.

Chapter Four: Joseph in Egypt

What were the exiled people of Judah to do? How were they to maintain their identity as a national group and not simply be assimilated...Or to put it more practically, what did they have to hold on to?

Friedman, Who Wrote the Bible? (1987)

Between the second century B.C.E. and the second century C.E., a large community of Jews of the Diaspora living in Hellenistic Egypt developed. Particularly in large urban centers such as Alexandria, this community enjoyed moments of political and religious autonomy; it was during one of these rare periods that the Septuagint was composed. They also suffered persecution by several rulers. In exile from their homeland, Hellenistic Jews sought to authorize and synthesize Judaism for both themselves and for their foreign neighbors. One scholar argues that “throughout the Hellenistic world the increasing contact between different ethnic groups led to a new self-consciousness within communities about their own historical traditions and how these traditions related to those of other peoples” (Coogan, 517). This community’s drive to authorize Judaism was spurred by “the relatively new context of the Hellenistic competition of cultures...especially in light of the even newer Roman empire’s quest to authorize itself through the appropriation of the Greek philosophical and literary heritage” (Berlin, 1841).

For this project, they turned in particular to the character of Joseph and his adventures in the land of Egypt. Their literary portrayals of his life, particularly his encounter with Potiphar’s wife, reflect on their developing self-understanding and their competing notions of how to behave towards the ‘other.’ These portrayals, unlike those of the Rabbis, are inextricable from their specific historical context—influenced, for example, by the philosophy they were exposed to in Egypt—but demonstrate the range of possible response to such an exilic situation, even within one people and one faith. In this sustained examination of ‘life among the other’ through

the vehicle of the Joseph narrative, we see the daily reality of each author's life intervene into his work. Thomas Mann's 'diasporic' biography intervenes in comparable ways into his Joseph narrative, rendering Mann's treatment of these Hellenistic sources particularly focused. Although the authors of these texts wrote them for specifically religious purposes and for a religious audience, the works they produced are rarely accepted into sacred canon today. Thus they intend to engage in 'sacred displacement,' like the Rabbis do, but the face of their rejection by many editors of scripture places them in a separate category for us—and, importantly, for Mann as a fellow modern recipient of this tradition.

Nickelsburg argues that these Jews were faced with the question: "How ought one to relate or respond to one's Gentile neighbors and the culture they represent?"²⁶ The answers varied; some, like Aristeas, argued for rapprochement, whereas others attempted to convert their neighbors, and yet another group sought to live in isolation, away from foreign influence. In James Kugel's work *In Potiphar's House*, he notes that "ancient Jewish biblical exegesis, however much it may have drawn on tendencies and actual material developed earlier in the biblical period, first appears in distinct literary form during the Hellenistic period" (Kugel, IPH, 6) Kugel names his work "In Potiphar's House" because he argues that "In considering the Jewish biblical exegesis of this period—*midrash* at an early stage—one cannot but think of its bearer's position within the surrounding cultural environment as similar to that of Joseph in Potiphar's house" (Kugel, IPH, 7). In other words, Jews were impressed and even tempted by Egyptian and Hellenistic culture, but "yet: if Joseph was changed and, in the story, likewise tempted in Potiphar's house, he nevertheless remained, in another sense, profoundly true to his origins" (Kugel, IPH, 7). Yet in turning to Joseph and Potiphar's wife, Nickelsburg qualifies that

²⁶ George W.E. Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature between the Bible and the Mishnah: A Historical and Literary Introduction*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 198.

“Opposition to pagan idolatry and sexual promiscuity is a common motif even in the writings that have a relatively positive view toward the Gentiles. On these issues there can be no compromise” (Nickelsburg, 191). In other words, although the interpreters of this period enter into a contentious conversation about the degrees of assimilation which are appropriate, they are unanimous in lauding Joseph for rejecting the seduction of Potiphar’s wife. Their reasons for this agreement vary. Some believe that no Jew should associate with foreign women at all, whereas others echo the sense of the original Genesis version in pointing to her status as the property of Potiphar.

The corpus which makes up the Pseudepigrapha—so named for these authors’ habit of assuming the identity of canonical biblical authors to produce ‘new’ books of the bible—is immense. I focus first on two extended texts, the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* and the novella *Joseph and Aseneth*, which both elevate Joseph as a moral and ethical model using the vehicle of his association with a woman, but in contrasting ways. The *Testament* extends the Joseph and Potiphar’s wife episode by exaggerating and demonizing the character of Potiphar’s wife, thus portraying Joseph as enduring great suffering but refusing to fall to temptation. *Joseph and Aseneth* creates a situation in which it is acceptable for Joseph to marry a foreign woman; the character of Aseneth is set in sharp contrast to Potiphar’s wife as a virginal, even Hebraic repentant idolatress who converts in order to marry Joseph. Since the text essentially argues that only by undergoing an extreme transformation can an Egyptian woman become acceptable to the Jews, viewed together these texts speak to an attitude which vilifies foreign women and warns against assimilation. Next, I turn to the Book of Jubilees and the Book of Maccabees, which both briefly mention Joseph. These texts portray Joseph’s interaction with Potiphar’s wife in a manner which elevates Joseph’s virtue of self-control above all other, but for different purposes. The

author of Jubilees joins the *Testament* and *Joseph and Aseneth* in opposing assimilation under any circumstances, whereas the author of Maccabees admits the possibility of being open to philosophical influence by the outsider, if not actual exogamy.

The *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* was most likely written by a Hellenized Jew sometime after the year 250 B.C.E. The *Testaments* draw on the model of the Blessing of Jacob depicted in Genesis 49 and Deuteronomy 33, but imagine each of Jacob's twelve sons speaking their own last words to their descendants. In the tradition of such blessings, each patriarch reflects on the events of their own life and exhorts their descendants not to make the same mistakes—and then testifies to the future of the tribe they fathered. H.C. Kee argues that the *Testaments* “build on Genesis 49 and the last words of Moses in order to serve as a vehicle for ethical and eschatological teaching.”²⁷ These ‘teachings’ fit uneasily within any orthodox understanding of Judaism; they reflect not only the diversity of Hellenistic-Judaic theology but also the openness of these authors to influence by other cultures. The *Testament of Joseph* is quite long—paralleling Joseph's ‘elect’ and privileged status in the canonical blessings—and reflects the particular fascination of Hellenistic Jews with Joseph, “which seems to have flourished among Egyptian Jews” (Kee, 778). The author depicts Joseph as an ethical model. His portrayal is similar to other Hellenistic works which refigure suffering Biblical characters, such as Abraham in the Book of Jubilees and Job in the Testament of Job; Nickelsburg argues that “the endurance of the spiritual athlete contending for virtue is a typical feature of Hellenistic moral philosophy and of Jewish martyr traditions” (Nickelsburg, 313).

²⁷ H.C. Kee, “The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs,” *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha and the New Testament: Prolegomena for the Study of Christian Origins*, Ed. James Hamilton Charlesworth, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 778.

In his *Testament*, Joseph is painted as such a paradigm of virtue through an expansion of his resistance to the seduction of Potiphar's wife. In Kugel's work *In Potiphar's House*, he notes that this seduction is "the main—virtually the only—item on the agenda" in the *Testament* (Kugel, IPH, 23). The author may be expanding on Genesis 39:10, "and she spoke to Joseph day after day"; the end result is a series of fourteen episodes of the seduction (Nickelsburg, 313). H.C. Kee argues that in the universe constructed by the authors and redactors of the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, self-control is among the greatest virtues of man, embodied in the figure of Joseph (Kee, 779). Kugel extends this argument, exclaiming: "[Joseph's] behavior in the face of temptation is exemplary—so much so that one might even say he was *not* tempted!" (Kugel, IPH, 23). Joseph's portrayal as an ethical model is heightened by contrast to the behavior of his brothers as depicted in their Testaments, some of whom—Reuben in particular—commit the "grossest sin" of sexual promiscuity (Kee, 779). Such an ethical construct may explain the author's focus on the episode with Potiphar's wife. This agenda is pursued through the extensive demonization of Potiphar's wife, who comes to exemplify all of this community's fears and prejudices against the idolatry and impure sexual conduct of their hosts; the wives of foreign women heighten these anxieties about the consequences of the uncontrolled body.

Recalling from Chapter Three that the Rabbis eventually add a moral layer onto what appears to be an issue of a violation of property rights in the original sacred text, Kee makes a curious argument that "sexual misdeeds are not linked to specific commandments [in the *Testaments*]; rather, they are handled by injunctions to temperance or asceticism, for which there is no basis in the Torah" (Kee, 779). Again we are faced with the unique quality of the Hellenistic-Judaic literary tradition. Scholars have certainly determined that many Hellenistic authors related particularly to the figure of Joseph and found his ascension in a foreign land

inspiring, thus it seems natural that these authors would elevate his virtues and perhaps use his story to warn against pagan women. But it is equally evident that in expanding the Joseph story from the original, sparse text, many of these authors chose to impose a moral element—which may have been drawn more from Hellenistic influences than their own legal-moral tradition established in the Torah. In doing so, the pseudepigraphic authors reveal how they sought to appropriate Joseph for pedagogical purposes specific to their circumstances, and they establish interpretive strains picked up by the Rabbis several centuries later.

Joseph's *Testament* detailing his struggles with Potiphar's wife outlines an attitude towards the pagan Egyptian, as well as foreign women in general. Kee argues that in the ethical scheme of the *Testaments*, "women are inherently evil...and entice men to commit sin" (Kee, 779). The author does develop the character of the seductress extensively, as Thomas Mann will later do in the opposite direction; Nickelsburg views the episodes as a struggle between "two able, wily, and resourceful opponents" (Nickelsburg, 312). In fact, Potiphar's wife goes to great length to attack Joseph, and her methods become increasingly offensive to him as a moral and ethical model—and as a Jew. In spite of a lack of direct scriptural correspondence, Joseph makes it clear that his virtue of self-control is inextricably tied to his relationship with his God; thus the assault of Potiphar's wife becomes an attack on the perceived morals of the Hebrew faith—depicted as alien to the Egyptians. When the seductress tempts him with a promise that he could rule over the household if he were to sleep with her, Joseph turns to his faith: "But I recalled my father's words, went weeping into my quarters, and prayed to the Lord" (Kee, 3:4). The author imagines that Jacob had often warned his sons against the wiles of foreign women; later exegetes pick up on this theme and portray Joseph as seeing his father's face before him in this critical moment. Mann appropriates this theme, but gives a seven-fold explanation for Joseph's chastity.

Joseph laments: “How often, then, did she flatter me with words as a holy man, deceitfully praising my self-control through her words in the presence of her husband, but when we were alone she sought to seduce me” (Kee, 4:1). The seductress publicly taunts Joseph with his greatest strength in front of the protector who has elevated him above all other servants, Potiphar—then relentlessly tests his control in private. Joseph then narrates: “when she achieved nothing by means of it, she began to approach me for instruction, so that she might learn the Word of God” (Kee., 4:5). In a mockery of Joseph’s faith, Potiphar’s wife offers to convert in exchange for a night with him; after being rebuffed again, she threatens to commit the murder of her husband “if you do not want to commit adultery”—which would make Joseph responsible for the breaking of a sacred commandment (Kee, 7).

Throughout these trials, Joseph retains total control. He even mourns on behalf of his seductress for her “deviousness” (Kee., 7). He dwells on his separation from the natives of this foreign land, saying: “For those seven years I fasted, and yet seemed to the Egyptians like someone who was living luxuriously, for those who fast for the sake of God receive graciousness of countenance” (Kee., 7). Having established Joseph’s iron will—“not even in my mind did I yield to her”—the author develops the character of the “shameless woman,” who asserts that she loves Joseph and is driven by her depression to a threat of suicide (Kee, 9:2). Her increasingly desperate attempts to win Joseph, combined with his utter scorn of her, turn Potiphar’s wife into a somewhat pitiful character. It is difficult to ascertain why the author felt compelled to push his narrative so far in this direction—in other words, why not make her an easily detestable villain instead of a sad, lonely wife? The net result, however, certainly elevates Joseph as a model of the ethically upright Hebrew man living among the other.

James Charlesworth argues that the document of the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs* “in its present and final form is a Christian document. It is, however, not a *Christian composition*, but a *Christian redaction* of earlier Jewish testaments.”²⁸ The Christian ‘redaction’ in Chapter 19 of the *Testament of Joseph* interrupts his predictions for the future of his two tribes to present a dream in which “From the twelve tribes of Israel...comes the Virgin Mary, who gives birth to the Lamb of God” (Nickelsburg, 313). Among these diverse Hellenistic texts, then, emerges a clear picture of the early Christian vision of Joseph. Where for Jews his importance lies partially in heralding the era of the tribes of Israel, for Christians, Joseph—as a clear Christ prototype—heralds the coming of the son of God; this *Testament’s* presentation in ‘blessing’ form even further reminds us of Joseph’s transitional role. Interestingly, both the *Testament of Joseph* and the novella *Joseph and Aseneth* (which I examine next) use a woman he is connected with to demonstrate his moral fiber—but accomplish this task with entirely opposite characters. In completing a true conversion to the Jewish faith in order to be with Joseph—but in de-sexualizing her attraction to him—Aseneth corrects all of Potiphar’s wife’s mistakes and emerges an exemplary heroine.

Joseph and Aseneth was most likely written in Greek between the second century B.C.E. and the beginning of the second century C.E., for a Jewish audience. The story seeks to elaborate on the statement in Genesis 41:45 that Joseph married Aseneth, “daughter of Potiphara, priest of On”—a Gentile woman—violating the numerous injunctions against intermarriage between Jews and Gentiles in the Hebrew Bible.²⁹ The author imagines that Aseneth, known equally for her beauty and her idolatry, falls in love with Joseph and converts to his faith. In Carol Newsom’s

²⁸ James Hamilton Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha and the New Testament: Prolegomena for the Study of Christian Origins*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 39.

²⁹ i.e. Gen. 24:2-4, 37-41; 27:46; 28:1

study *The Persian and Hellenistic Periods*, she notes that the tale “depicts some of the complications that attended Jewish-Gentile relations in Hellenistic Egypt”; Susan Docherty argues that the novella demonstrates the “continuing popularity of the Joseph story among Jews of the Diaspora” (Coogan, 515; Docherty, 198). By depicting Joseph’s dominating virtues as self-control and chastity, and in creating a situation where Joseph *can* couple rightfully with a foreign woman—primarily on account of her own chastity—the author of *Joseph and Aseneth* comments implicitly on the biblical episode with Potiphar’s wife.

Despite the centrality of conversion to the story, scholars agree that *Joseph and Aseneth* was not intended as a missionary tract to attract others to the Jewish faith. Burchard argues that the text offers an ethical injunction against non-Jewish women and “satisfies pious curiosity as to the circumstances of a noted patriarch’s surprise wedding to a non-Jew,” but was primarily an attempt to adapt “Greek belletristic literature”; in other words, the author strove for aesthetic value.³⁰ The story has formal roots in Hellenistic romance and conversion stories, and bears similarities to other ancient Jewish texts with female protagonists, such as Ruth, Judith, Tobit, or Esther. *Joseph and Aseneth* joins other Jewish Hellenistic literature in imitating the literary style of the Bible (Burchard, 186). Also like other contemporary texts, it is studied for its relation to early Christianity—in fact, because of its eucharist-like imagery and the epithet “son of God” many characters attach to Joseph, the tale later became an important Christian text. Burchard and others are quick to point out, though, that any thematic connections to the New Testament reflect the common textual heritage of Judaism and Christianity rather than any Christian authorship or

³⁰ C. Burchard, *Joseph and Aseneth*, trans., James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Volume 2: Expansions of the ‘Old Testament’ and Legends, Wisdom and Philosophical Literature, Prayers, Psalms, and Odes, Fragments of Lost Judeo-Hellenistic Works*, (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1985) 187.

intent; however, they argue the text is “important for understanding the Jewish milieu in the Diaspora from which many early Christians were recruited” (Charlesworth, 132-133).³¹

In Burchard’s introduction to the text, he states that Part One—Aseneth’s conversion—defines Judaism in contrast to the pagan world (Burchard, 189). The author depicts the pagan world as defiled with the language of death and destruction, so Aseneth’s conversion becomes a creation of new life. Her conversion is inextricable from her love for Joseph and therefore becomes a love story with God, enacted with the language of passionate devotion. Joseph embodies and impersonates the author’s God; both hate idolatry but are merciful to those who repent. Presumably since the author’s tale centers on the legitimacy of conversion, a distinction is drawn in his fictional universe between ethnic Jews who succumb to the personal failure of sin and Jews who, through right practice of ritual and devotion, recognize God. As Burchard puts it, Aseneth’s “re-creation” transforms her from a mere human state to the near-angelic state of pious Jews: “but what Judaism offers over non-Jewish existence is privilege, not obligation” (Burchard, 192-193). The author presents right living with God as a personal choice, and offers no injunction to proselytize. In fact, Joseph does not take any action besides a brief prayer to encourage Aseneth’s conversion in the story. Aseneth herself, however, becomes the model proselyte for the Jewish faith. She is re-named the ‘City of Refuge’ (Burchard, 17:6); this is no small detail, for the author clearly wishes to imbue the ceremony with the same religious weight as the re-naming of Abram to ‘Abraham’ or Jacob to ‘Israel’. The implication is that salvation for a non-Jew is dependant on association with her.

Yet fascinatingly, the author’s depiction of the character of Aseneth—and its overt contrast to the Genesis 39 story of Potiphar’s wife—seems to imply that not all Gentiles are

³¹ For example, the story can be viewed as a Gnostic allegory, uniting Wisdom, personified in error by Aseneth, and divine Logos, personified as the savior in Joseph.

worthy of Joseph, and by association, Judaism. Aseneth is described as an unmatched beauty, but the quality of her beauty is distinctly *not* Egyptian: “And this (girl) had nothing similar to the virgins of the Egyptians, but she was in every respect similar to the daughters of the Hebrews; and she was tall as Sarah and handsome as Rebecca and beautiful as Rachel” (Burchard, 1:5). Although the text does specify that she adorns this Hebraic appearance with ornaments engraved with the names of Egyptian gods, the description is in distinct contrast to artistic depictions of the alien beauty of Potiphar’s wife. In addition, Aseneth is a virgin—a point emphasized over and over in the text—whereas Potiphar’s wife is not only undoubtedly not a virgin, but is also depicted universally as lustful. Aseneth lives with seven virgin attendants, never converses with men, and sleeps on a bed which has never been touched by a man. When Pentephres, Aseneth’s father, describes Joseph to her as “self-controlled, and a virgin like you today” the connection becomes clear (Burchard, 4:7). Indeed, Joseph is only willing to receive Aseneth when he learns that she is also a virgin, and seeks to greet her as a sister (Burchard, 7:8).

As the author of *Joseph and Aseneth* establishes that Aseneth is suitable for Joseph by virtue of her contrast to Potiphar’s wife, the repercussions of Genesis 39 resound again in the story. When Aseneth is first told by her father that she is to marry Joseph, she scorns him—ironically—as “an alien, and a fugitive...he himself was caught in the act (when he was) sleeping with his mistress” (Burchard, 4:9-10). Although Aseneth has only heard the legend about what happened between Joseph and Potiphar’s wife second-hand, the idea disgusts her, reinforcing her aversion to lust and thus her moral suitability. In addition, Joseph’s traumatic past has clearly affected his interactions with Egyptian women. He spies Aseneth at the window and is afraid, thinking “This one must not molest me, too”; the text explains that he is constantly besieged by pagan women who have “suffered badly because of his beauty” (Burchard, 7:3-4). The author,

like many of his contemporaries, implies that Joseph only endures these advances through the memory of his God and his father Jacob: he repeats his defense of Genesis 39, saying “I will not sin before (the) Lord God of my father Israel nor in the face of my father Jacob” and remembers his father’s warning against “associating with a strange woman” (Burchard, 7:5-6). Even when he agrees to receive Aseneth as a fellow virgin, he refuses to allow her to kiss him, arguing that it would be improper for his mouth—used to praise God and eat the ritual bread—to touch the mouth of a woman who praises idols and drinks their impure libations (Burchard, 8:5).

Joseph’s reservations underline the importance of ‘right practice’ for this author’s Judaism; his words evoke the language of the laws of ritual purity in Deuteronomy and Leviticus. In fact, the text states that Joseph will not break bread with the Egyptians, “for this was an abomination to him” (Burchard, 7:1). In sum, the scholar George Nickelsburg states that Aseneth’s status as an idolatress presents two problems for Joseph: “First, because she worships ‘dead and deaf idols,’ she is cut off from ‘the living God’”; second, “her state of defilement imperils her relationship to Joseph.” (Nickelsburg 335). The author seems to demonstrate that her status as a virgin and her Hebraic looks make her an acceptable candidate for Joseph if only she will accept conversion, presented as passage from death to life. This text explains the otherwise extremely troubling fact of Joseph’s marriage to an Egyptian. Mann borrows narrative elements from *Joseph and Aseneth* and is equally determined to confront this taboo moment in the text. He is utterly unapologetic, however, in portraying Aseneth as fully Egyptian and fully pagan; Mann operates in a secular sphere which allows him to be far more ambivalent towards the problem of assimilation. We understand just how troubling this act of assimilation is to the Hellenistic authors through the vilification of Egyptian women and sexuality in the *Testament*, which presents a situation where Joseph absolutely cannot couple with a foreign woman. *Joseph*

and Aseneth imagines an improbable one where he can. The message is that these daily choices one makes in a foreign land are directly connected to your ongoing survival—in other words, God’s continued protection of you in a dangerous situation.

The last two texts I study from this period present similar representations of Joseph as a model of self-control, but for vastly different purposes. Although the Book of Jubilees and the Book of Maccabees were both intended for the same audience, Jews of the Diaspora between the first century B.C.E. to the first century C.E., they present opposing instructions, via the same vehicle, on how to deal with the ‘other’. The author of the Book of Jubilees is adamantly against assimilation with foreigners, especially absorbing their culture; his iron-willed Joseph is grounded in a model of a Jew resisting modern forces. Conversely, the author of the Fourth Book of Maccabees is not only open to outside influence but even seeks to prove that Hellenism and Judaism are complementary; his iron-willed Joseph is grounded in a model of a Greek philosopher as the fulfillment of Jewish law. These texts demonstrate that although seemingly every Hellenistic author points to Joseph’s self-control as the virtue which accounts for his relevance—and such repetition may seem limiting—in fact, such a portrait was versatile enough to dictate two fundamentally divergent attitudes towards life among the ‘other’.

The Book of Jubilees was most likely written by a Palestinian Jew around the first century B.C.E. Although this text did not originate from Hellenized Egypt, I include it in this study because the author uses the story of Joseph to comment on the relationship between Diasporic Jews and their foreign hosts. In his introduction to the text, O.S. Wintermute argues that the author of Jubilees saw Israel as “qualitatively different from all other nations. In the context of such an understanding, the hostility between Israel and surrounding nations may be

seen as a conflict between good and evil.”³² The author presents a history of Israel as it was relayed to Moses during the forty days he spent on Mount Sinai, focusing particularly on Jacob and his sons.

The homiletical text seeks to adapt the Pentateuch narrative to the current situation of the Diaspora, focusing primarily on the necessity of strict obedience to Jewish law. Wintermute notes that the author was likely trying to counter “arguments that Jewish ritual law and piety are no longer relevant” (Wintermute, 40). Joseph’s narrative becomes relevant for the author’s emphatic arguments against the temptation “to intermarry with [Gentiles], adopt their customs”; using Joseph as a model of self-control, the Book of Jubilees preaches against such evils (Wintermute, 40). Nickelsburg’s essay on Jubilees agrees with this assessment but goes so far as to define intermarriage with non-Israelite women as the “cause of defilement in the nation” (Nickelsburg, 71). In other words, the author identifies such violations of the Law—“applying standards of priestly purity to the whole of Israel, ‘a kingdom of priests’”—as the cause of the scattered and weakened state of the nation of Israel (Nickelsburg, 71). Hollander agrees, noting that Jubilees joins other contemporary texts in portraying Joseph as a religious and ethical model (Hollander, 237).

The Jubilees text first summarizes the key elements of the Biblical narrative of Joseph’s life, then pauses to expand the episode with Potiphar’s wife. Describing Joseph as “very handsome,” the author narrates the desperate attempts of Potiphar’s wife to seduce him. Joseph’s response touches on familiar themes, such as an invocation of his forefathers, but characterizes these themes in a particular way:

³² O.S. Wintermute, *The Book of Jubilees*, trans., James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Volume 2: Expansions of the ‘Old Testament’ and Legends, Wisdom and Philosophical Literature, Prayers, Psalms, and Odes, Fragments of Lost Judeo-Hellenistic Works*, (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1985), 87.

And he did not surrender himself but he remembered the Lord and the words which Jacob, his father, used to read, which were from the words of Abraham, that there is no man who (may) fornicate with a woman who has a husband (and) that there is a judgment of death which is decreed for him in heaven before the Lord Most High. And the sin is written (on high) concerning him in the eternal books always before the Lord.”

(Wintermute, 39:5-7)

The first lines evoke the memory of his father and his ancestor Abraham in much the same way as other texts such as the *Testament of Joseph*—in fact, the author of Jubilees earlier depicts Abraham as uttering such an injunction against marrying foreign women (and, predictably, against idolatry) in Jubilees 22:20-22. The injunction occurs, coincidentally, in Abraham’s blessing of Jacob, which parallels the *Testaments* in its exhortations of right behavior to the next generation. And yet even though Abraham’s words prohibit taking a wife “from any of the seed of the daughters of Canaan...because through the sin of Ham, Canaan sinned” and line up with the many contemporary warnings against foreign women—which, since they usually occur alongside injunctions against idolatry and such language about the line of Ham, often conjure an image of Egypt—the author’s words for Joseph point to “a woman who has a husband,” not a foreign woman (Wintermute, 22:20-21). Perhaps the author intends his reader to identify the allusion to his earlier depiction of Abraham’s blessing in order to grasp the implied warning against foreign women. However, the language used recalls the issue of property rights which, in the original Genesis text, is presented as Joseph’s central argument against his seductress: “my master...has withheld nothing from me except yourself, since you are his wife. How then could I do this most wicked thing, and sin before God?” (Genesis 39:8-9). It is unclear why an author

who is so clearly against intermarriage with outsiders here points instead to the transgression of taking another man's wife.

In addition to this peculiarity of the text, the author imagines that Joseph is afraid not only of divine judgment for sleeping with his master's wife but also the eternal legacy of such a sin for his relationship with God (Wintermute, 39:7). This author's Joseph is unique in such a concern in comparison to his contemporaries. The consequences of Joseph's actions are discussed at length several centuries later by the Rabbis, as I discussed in Chapter Three. The Rabbis imagine a Joseph who is terribly concerned, for example, that if he goes through with the sexual transgression, he will be robbed of his birthright much like Reuben had been for a similar sin. He frets over possible divine punishment, even worrying that this transgression will render him unsuitable should he be asked to sacrifice himself like Isaac on the mountain (Genesis 22; Genesis Rabbah). But for these Hellenistic texts, such reflections are unique. Interestingly, Wintermute argues that the Book of Jubilees contains parallels to the style of later Rabbinic *midrash* and employs similar types of homiletic interpretation (Wintermute, 84). Since it is impossible to ascertain the motivations behind the Book of Jubilees' particular slant on Joseph and Potiphar's wife, I can only conclude that the text demonstrates again the versatility of such an episode for moralizing purposes. Perhaps the implication is that an upright Jew should not violate even the property of the idolatrous Gentile 'other'—that the Law applies both within and without the chosen people.

The Fourth Book of Maccabees was most likely written between 63 B.C.E. and 70 C.E., in a place of Greek influence such as Alexandria. The author's primary source text was the Septuagint and his aim, according to H. Anderson's introduction to the text, was "to advocate fidelity to the Law and to demonstrate that the hope of fulfilling the Greek ideal of virtue resides

only in obedience to the Law of Judaism.”³³ His text, then consists of a complete synthesis of Greek philosophy with discussion of the lives of Jewish scriptural heroes; Nickelsburg argues that “the citing of biblical figures as examples of abstract virtues (and vices) is typical of the didactic literature of this period” (Nickelsburg, 256). Anderson adds that “all he has learned from the Greeks is enlisted in the service of Judaism, to show that the cardinal virtues...indeed the very essence of Greek wisdom, are subsumed under the law or obedience to it (Anderson, 538). Much as later Christian scholars will argue that Christ is the fulfillment of Jewish law—and, incidentally, will incorporate Greek thinking into their argument—the author of Maccabees argues here that Judaism is the fulfillment of Greek ideals. Anderson notes that the only point where the author allows the influence of Greek philosophers such as the Platonists and the Stoics to take precedence over his Judaism is in a belief in the immortality of the soul. Other Hellenistic texts, such as the Wisdom of Solomon and the texts of Philo of Alexandria, share in this departure from orthodox Jewish belief, demonstrating again the syncretic nature of Judaism during this formative period.

Most importantly, however, the author of Maccabees “transposes” the narratives of the patriarchs “into the key of Greek philosophy” in order to demonstrate that “reason is sovereign over the passions” (Nickelsburg, 256). Nickelsburg argues that in this text, Joseph becomes the embodiment of *sōphrosynē*, or the Hellenistic virtue of self-control (Nickelsburg, 256).

Hollander concurs that in Joseph’s encounter with Potiphar’s wife, the author of Maccabees presents a Jewish hero demonstrating “temperance and chastity” (Hollander, 240). The tenor of

³³ H. Anderson, *The Book of Maccabees*, trans., James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Volume 2: Expansions of the ‘Old Testament’ and Legends, Wisdom and Philosophical Literature, Prayers, Psalms, and Odes, Fragments of Lost Judeo-Hellenistic Works*, (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1985), 532.

the author's Greek philosophical language produces a text which stands apart from its more strictly imitative pseudepigraphic contemporaries:

What wonder, then, if the desires of the soul for union with beauty are deprived of their force? It is on these very grounds that the temperate Joseph is praised, because through his own rational faculty he gained mastery over his sensuality. Though a young man at the prime of his sexual desire, he quenched the burning ardor of his passions (Anderson, 2:1-5).

Joseph's encounter with Potiphar's wife, then, is not invoked in a narrative context, but a philosophical one discussing the Platonic notion of the soul's desire for closeness with beauty. It is also interesting that Joseph's self-control is discussed with specific reference to sexual temptation, as opposed to other texts which often dance around the issue with discussions of the temptation to sin against his master and against God. In contrast to, for example, the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, this text takes for granted that Joseph was tempted by the seductress. But there is no mention of the woman herself. The author's Hellenistic language implies an openness to foreign ideas, but he makes it clear that they are subordinate—even in service to—the Law of Judaism (Anderson, 544). The author seems to be even using the foreign philosophy—the virtue of reason—to strengthen his argument against sexual transgressions. This implies that marriage to a foreign woman, forbidden by the Law, falls under this category of the sin of passion. This is perhaps a mixed message; is the author implying that it is acceptable to open your mind to the 'other' but not your home or your body? Other texts (*The Testament of Joseph, Joseph and Aseneth*) seem to think it is unacceptable to open your mind by portraying Joseph as refusing to break bread with the Egyptians and finding their rituals abhorrent. It seems that besides the author of Maccabees and others like Josephus who integrate Greek philosophy

into their texts, most Hellenistic exegetes are more comfortable with an image of Joseph as Jewish in appearance and deportment, who succeeds in Egypt despite his foreign qualities. The Rabbis later agree with this; one strain in *Genesis Rabbah* depicts Joseph as wandering around Potiphar's house muttering Torah-teachings, almost as a defense against the idolatry and paganism around him. In these texts we see the urgency with which exegetes viewed the question of God's involvement in our daily lives. They perceived heightened consequences to Joseph's daily choices in Egypt and sought to instruct their peers through his story to remain true to their faith and identity. Keeping Joseph 'Jewish' in these texts, and demonizing the 'other,' is an act of faith that the exilic situation of these exegetes is temporary; that God will come to save them soon, but perhaps he will not look favorably upon those who have lost their identity. The message is that the more faithful they remain to their own ways and beliefs, the quicker God will come to bring them back to the homeland.

Chapter Five: *Joseph and His Brothers*

As we have seen, the Joseph tradition to which Thomas Mann turned in the twentieth century was intimately bound with the concerns of sacred communities. The story to which Mann was attracted traces a singular biography, one which happens to illuminate with particular poignancy the ambiguity central to these concerns of sacred communities. Mann faced a tradition in unresolved conversation with itself, in a self-perpetuating dialectic oscillating back and forth on issues vital to the understanding of its own sacred nature. Mann's massive intervention into this tradition in *Joseph and His Brothers* halts this pattern; he boldly defines the relationship between this sacred community and its God in his narrative. Mann can only make such a radical move because of what has been gained in the distance of centuries from the tradition, which has created for modern novelists a whole new dimension of 'displacement' of sacred text.

He is able to de-sacrilize the Joseph tradition on account of, for example, the advent of biblical criticism and an increasingly globalized society in which assimilation is a more necessary means of survival. Mann is also able to sort through this whole tradition, to determine which exegete's plot expansions seem more plausible than others. He builds a complex sacred universe around his fully defined divine-human relationship and ostentatiously displays its flaws, clearly commenting on what he sees as the limited nature of a religious world view. Mann's narrative methodology, however, allows the original ambiguity of the Genesis text to creep into his epic in new and intriguing ways.

Paul Thomas Mann was born in 1875 in Lübeck, Germany. His father worked in the family grain business and died early, leaving Thomas and his brother Heinrich with an ample inheritance. Mann struggled in school; afterwards, he pursued a variety of practical professions while beginning to write fiction. As a writer, he was successful almost immediately. After his

obligatory military service, Mann settled in Munich, where he fell secretly in love with Paul Ehrenberg. During this period his first major novel, *Buddenbrooks*, was published (1900). In Hannelore Mundt's work *Understanding Thomas Mann*, he argues that the "secret theme of forbidden love was at the heart of Mann's creativity."³⁴ Despite his clandestine passions, Mann married a wealthy, educated woman named Katia Pringsheim in 1905. This marriage gained Mann entry into the world of Germany's middle class; he remained loyal to their humanistic values and bourgeois discipline for the rest of his life.

Mann's career took off during his early marriage, as he and Katia had six children. After the close of the first World War, he became even more popular as a representative of the bourgeois intellectual class. He published works such as *Königliche Hoheit (Royal Highness)* in 1909, *Death in Venice* in 1911, and *Der Zauberberg (The Magic Mountain)* in 1924. In 1926 he began work on the *Joseph* tetralogy, traveling to Egypt and Palestine for research. He received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1929, and published the first volume *The Tales of Jacob* in Germany in 1933. Soon after, Mann embarked on a book tour to Switzerland. Mann was critical of the rise of the National Socialist movement and thus was warned not to return home; an order was issued for his deportation to Dachau and his German citizenship was revoked in 1936. The second and third volumes of *Joseph and His Brothers*, *Young Joseph* and *Joseph in Egypt*, were both published in Switzerland in 1934 and 1936, respectively; however, Mann wrote the majority of the second volume in Germany before being exiled to Switzerland, where he wrote the third. During the war, Mann became a famous German exile as he toured the world, eventually speaking openly against Hitler's regime. In 1938 he accepted a position as a lecturer at Princeton University; he moved to Los Angeles more permanently in 1941. The final volume of *Joseph*

³⁴ Hannelore Mundt, *Understanding Thomas Mann*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 5.

and His Brothers, Joseph the Provider, was published in the United States in 1943. Although his skepticism at the rapid ideological shift of Germany after the war kept him from returning home, Mann remained a defender of humanistic German culture, evidenced by works such as *Doctor Faustus* (1947). His frustration with the anti-communist manhunt in the United States drove him back to Switzerland, where he lived until the end of his life in 1955 (Mundt, 1-21).

Mann's life was marked by a split between his engagement in bourgeois society and his feeling of being an outsider. These elements probably heightened his attraction to the story of Joseph; part of the nature of his intervention into the Joseph tradition is traceable to both the author's own biography and the historical events occurring at the time he wrote. Much of what we know of Mann's homosexual desires and his feelings of alienation from society was discovered with the periodical release of his personal diaries from 1977 to 1995. Mundt argues that these diaries reveal that what Mann's works all have in common, "and what makes them timeless, current, and universally appealing, is their concern with sexual repression, conformity, and the individual's responsibilities in society" (Mundt, 2). These themes—most notably sexual repression and the role of the creative outsider in society—are played out in Mann's retelling of the Joseph narrative. Terry Wright argues that Mann's evolving relationship with religion also deeply influenced this project; in Mann's early life he was hostile and then ambivalent to Christianity, but his later career was marked by a deep interest in (non-doctrinal) religion as the potential saving grace for modern man.³⁵ He was consistently critical of blind piety and the dogmatic institutions of religion, but developed an interest in the soul concurrent with his fascination with the mythological origins of humanity (Wright, 136-137). Mann's early disdainful attitude towards Judaism also shifted with the start of his *Joseph* project; in fact,

³⁵ Terry R. Wright, *The Genesis of Fiction: Modern Novelists as Biblical Interpreters*, (Burlington: Ashgate, 2007), 134).

during his exile in the United States—while he wrote the last *Joseph* novel—he became known as a spokesman for the Jewish cause, alerting many Americans to the reality of the Holocaust in Europe. Wright argues that “there were other historical forces at work in Germany from the late 1920s which made a return to the Jewish roots of western culture compelling. Seeking a counterbalance to Nazi propaganda, Mann discovered in the religion he had previously scorned the values necessary to withstand the threat of fascism” (Wright, xi). Mann did develop a reverence for Christianity, particularly our literary-cultural debt to the faith, but remained detached; many scholars view his later novels as an attempt to ‘rescue’ religion from the threat of fundamentalism (Wright, 139).

In Mann’s own introduction to the 1948 American edition of *Joseph and His Brothers* in a single volume, entitled “Sixteen Years,” he describes the work as a “symbol of stability” during a tumultuous time in his life; “my staff and my stay along a path that often led through many a dark valley.”³⁶ This language is interesting given Mann’s complicated feelings about religion; it suggests a spiritual relationship between the author and what he considered to be the central work of his life. He adds that the *Joseph* manuscript was the “sole guarantee of continuity in my life” during the turmoil of the Second World War (Mann, xxxv). Yet it seems Mann could not even rely on the tetralogy for sanctuary from current events; he notes that while writing it, “I had, thanks to my political writings, subjected my artistic work to pressures, to the psychological disruptions and encumbrances, of nationalist hatred” (Mann, xxxiv).

Indeed, the effect of wartime on Mann’s life became relevant to the thematic material of the *Joseph* works, which often reflect his ideological split with the Nazi regime. Perhaps most appropriately, he turned to volume three of the series—in which Joseph is exiled by his

³⁶ Mann, Thomas, *Joseph and His Brothers*, Trans. John E. Woods, 4 vols, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), xxxii.

brothers—at the moment of his own exile from his German homeland. Of the final volume, which explores Joseph’s administrative talent over a foreign people, Mann states: “The story came into being under the awful tension of a war on whose outcome the fate of the world, of Western civilization, indeed of everything in which I believed, appeared to hang...of a war whose cause I constantly felt called to serve with my words” (Mann, xxxviii-xxxix). During his exile, Mann alternated between passionate political discourse “when I could give free rein to my hatred of those who had corrupted Germany and Europe” and his fiction, “the work of peace and my ‘temple theater’” (Mann, xxxix).

Inevitably, then, given that the Joseph narrative lends itself to political allegory, Mann’s views on the transformation of his native country emerge particularly in the final two volumes of the *Joseph* series. These allusions to the cultural context in which Mann wrote the novels are present but not pervasive; they stand alongside Mann’s highly complex and conceptually autonomous ‘temple theater’ of the Joseph story. I study them here as one type of intervention Mann makes into the Joseph tradition, comparable to the Hellenistic authors who allegorized Joseph’s story to their own political circumstances. Drawing on a central personal concern—which appears in many of his novels—of the problematic existence of a narcissistic, creative outsider to society, Mann uses aspects of the narrative to comment on the disengagement of the bourgeois intellectual class from the problems of the Weimar Republic. For example, in *The Tales of Jacob*, Mann presents Joseph’s father as absorbed with his intellectual and religious pursuits and uninterested in social or political concerns. However, his withdrawal from the affairs of his family has devastating consequences (Mundt, 140). While Mann certainly elevates the creative intellect of Jacob and his son—suggesting even that “Joseph deserves to be privileged over his uneducated, coarse, and violent brothers”—this “parable of powerless

spirituality” emerges as a motif in these novels (Mundt, 141). But as the political situation changed around him, Mann’s ‘Joseph’ matured, and with him the author revealed an example of the constructive involvement such a creative intellect can have.

From the destructive effects of both Jacob and Joseph’s narcissism, Mann moved to a portrayal of Potiphar, who, some argue, embodies the positive elements of the educated middle class of the Weimar Republic: humanism and tolerance. Within Potiphar’s household, Mann presents the ideological contrasts he saw within the Weimar Republic. The character of Potiphar’s wife is arguably aligned with a cult which resembles the rising nationalistic, conservative movement of National Socialism, and in her regression from sympathetic character to vengeful fanatic, she represents the irrational, anti-humanist regression of that faction of the Weimar Republic into Nazism. Several scholars note that when she is finally driven to the wild accusation which sends Joseph to prison, her speech is reminiscent of the “demagoguery” used by Hitler to rouse a crowd (Mundt, 148). Yohannan notes that she “exploits the racial prejudices of the mob” in a manner similar to the National Socialists “who had driven Mann from his native land” (Yohannan, 303). In sum, Mundt remarks: “On the realistic level of *Joseph in Egypt*, Mut’s story is one of unrequited love and revenge. On the symbolic level, Mut’s story contains Mann’s rejection of German politics” (Mundt, 148). Mundt adds that Potiphar “could have stopped his wife’s Dionysian rapture, but does not act”; therefore Potiphar joins Jacob as representative of the passive middle class who did not take steps to prevent the spread of irrationality (Mundt, 149).

Finally, as Joseph recovers from the effects of the events in Potiphar’s house and rises to the position of administrator over Egypt, Mann again presents a character with an aesthetic, intellectual, progressive orientation—the Pharaoh. This time, however, Mundt argues that the

mature Joseph “proves that he is the one who can mediate between the intellectual realm and worldly concerns, who can convert Amenhotep’s progressive, humanistic position into social and political reality” (Mundt, 152). Through the evolution of Joseph, then, Mann demonstrated a positive function for creativity in society; he believed that in combining the creative forces natural to the German aesthetic with a “rational, intellectual orientation” in the ambassador of the bourgeois artist, such an individual could play a constructive role in German society (Mundt, 137). Mundt summarizes that the work “starts with Mann’s criticism of the alienation of the creative individual from life and the social remoteness of intellectuality, and ends optimistically with an artist-outsider who has learned to participate in life” (Mundt, 154). These political interventions, then, prove an ameliorating force for the pathos of Mann’s personal life, which attracted him to Joseph in the first place.

Although he undoubtedly felt ill at ease with the late entry of the United States to the European conflict, which he compared to “Achilles leaving his tent after the death of Patroclus,” Mann found parallels between his work on *Joseph the Provider* and the nature of his American host (xxxix). He observed that “there can be no doubt that [the novel] shares here and there in the spirit of this nation,” most notably in the character of Joseph the Administrator. Mundt explains that the system Joseph sets up in Egypt is designed, like Roosevelt’s New Deal, to protect the weak in society. Although he certainly admired the democracy of the United States, Mann never shed his allegiance to the aristocratic notion of a cultural elite. In this way, his ‘assimilation’ into American society at the end of his life can be compared to Joseph’s in Egypt; Mann’s creative achievements elevated him to an uneasy position of authority in American society just as Joseph’s talents had, but both author and character remained loyal to their native nature on the inside.

In addition to this political intervention, Mann's project intervenes in the Joseph tradition by taking the process of 'displacement' I have discussed to a new level. Mann's method of narration makes his novels both more intimate and more separate from the tradition he inherits; more intimate in the sense that he employs the entirety of the accumulated Joseph works, and more separate in that he is often irreverent to or disdainful of these works, in essence 'de-sacrilizing' his version. This sense of 'displacement' is realized in Mann's use of metafiction, which calls our attention both to the depth of his familiarity with his source material, and his self-positioning as an outsider passing judgment on these sources.

In preparation for writing *Joseph and His Brothers*, Mann conducted extensive research, not only on the many versions of the Joseph story in various cultures, but also on Babylonian, Egyptian, and Greek myths (Mundt, 136; Yohannan, 4). He took two trips to Egypt and Palestine. His heavy reliance on literary and mythical allusion speaks not only to his (mostly) inclusive approach to narrating Joseph's life, but also to his lofty purpose. Mann's use of epic convention in his prelude, entitled "Descent Into Hell"—which includes allusions to Goethe's *Faust* and Dante's *Inferno*—is reminiscent of the opening lines of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, in which the poet calls attention to his intent to join the ranks of Homer and Virgil. Mann's descent into the mythological world begins a work that is often meta-fictitious in its open discussion of narrative choices, such as what sources he chose to include and exclude. Yohannan argues that "what gives Mann's retelling of the Joseph and Potiphar's wife episode its unique character is precisely the self-consciousness with which it is retold" (Yohannan, 295). For example, when Mann first presents an image of young Joseph at the well, he discusses the legends which have developed around his beauty: "...hearsay and poetry have woven a veritable halo of fabled

beauty...what all has not been proclaimed and asserted, in song and saga, in apocrypha and pseudepigrapha, in praise of his appearance?" (Mann, 46).

Yet at times, Mann seems to believe that his masterpiece contains the 'true' story of Joseph. In the critical moment when Mann turns to the infamous words of Potiphar's wife in Genesis 39, the author is profuse in his statements of horror at the curtness of the original text and the villainous tradition it engendered, and proclaims to now give the accurate version. However, these statements are ironic given Mann's open discussion of his research: as Wright says, "Mann knows well enough the impossibility of getting back to what Potiphar's wife 'really' said; he is playing self-consciously with the different generic conventions of ancient folktale and modern novel" (Wright, 164). When Mann digresses from the narrative to discuss the length of time which Joseph spent in Potiphar's house, he pauses: "the question appears unseemly. Do we know our story or do we not?" (Mann, 671). Reflecting on the narrator's relationship to his story—being in the 'story's space' but outside of it as well, and thus in a position to comment on it—he asserts: "At no point have we intended to awaken the illusion that we are the original source of the story of Joseph...the story happened before anyone could tell it...in happening it told itself" (Mann, 671). Mann notes the sheer number of interpreters through which the story has passed, and comments that in him, the story "gains self-contemplation and the specificity of detail by recalling what once actually happened to it" (Mann, 672).

This last claim to 'specificity of detail' explains many passages in which he seems to 'reason out' a problematic detail of the text by logic; the logic, however, is driven by a causal understanding of events in motion to fulfill God's plan, which I will discuss later. But this claim *is*, in effect, one of a certain authenticity, despite his protests otherwise—not an empirically proven, scientific 'truth' but a religious truth, a version of events which makes sense in the

textually constructed universe of Mann's understanding of Abraham and his descendants. An unresolved tension, therefore, threads through the novels, between Mann's claim to originality and his full disclosure of his writing process—of sorting through sources for 'legitimacy' and poetic value, or of the research involved in re-creating Joseph's world realistically. Above all, Mann views his own project as both joining a distinguished literary tradition *and* completing it or even superseding it.

Wright argues that this 'displaced' relationship Mann has to his sources is characteristic of modern novelists as biblical interpreters, who employ an intertextual methodology. In the words of Roland Barthes, "The one text is...an entrance into a network with a thousand entrances...none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one" (Wright, 147). Mann orchestrates a conversation between historical interpreters of Genesis, between the Rabbis and the Persian poets and the writers of the Deuteronomistic canon. In his introduction, he describes his project as "a work of language in whose polyphony sounds of the ancient Near East are blended with something very modern" (Mann, xxxix). Scholars have noted that Mann's work "often reads like an exegesis and amplification of the Torah, like a rabbinical *midrash*" (Wright, 147). The author did draw heavily on the thoughts of both *Genesis Rabbah* and bin Gorion's *Die Sagen der Juden (Legends of the Jews)*, especially in the particulars of his plot. But his approach is comparable in interesting ways to that of the Rabbis; Terry Wright argues in *The Genesis of Fiction* that "there is some historical and intertextual continuity between the rabbinic retelling of biblical narrative and the way in which a number of modern novelists attempt to make sense of these stories" (Wright, x-xi).

Understanding Wright's argument for the connections between the approach of the Rabbis and that of modern biblical interpreters helps us situate Mann's singular blend of both

supplementing the work of his predecessors, and replacing it with what he considered a superior understanding of the nuances of Joseph's story. Wright points out the difficulties modern interpreters face in reading an ancient text, concluding that "the novelists inevitably bring to the original stories horizons of understanding vastly different from those pertaining when the stories were first told" (Wright, x). One such horizon concerns God as he is presented in the original sacred text; many modern novelists struggle with his character and "have difficulty in giving [it] imaginative substance"—except, it would seem, Thomas Mann (Wright, xii). Mann certainly questions the nature of God as he is traditionally understood, but he stands alone among his peers in seriously attempting to provide an "alternative theological understanding" of the character of God in Genesis (Wright, xii). That he proposes such an alternative understanding speaks to Mann's irreverence to the original sacred text, and the significance of his intervention into that tradition.

With the advent of the Documentary Hypothesis and source criticism, the texts modern interpreters face are shrouded in an aura of deeper mystery. Exegetes must reach across centuries to grasp the intent of multiple authors and multiple redactions. Eric Auerbach argues that this mystery requires interpretive engagement; Robert Alter posits that key information is strategically withheld by the ancient writers so that readers must supply the details themselves (Wright, 3). Wright contends that modern writers, then, share in the '*midrashic*' belief "that one of the best ways of understanding a story is to retell it, to augment the original narrative with additional details which 'answer' the questions it raises" (Wright, 10). Derrida agrees that "there exists a whole interpretation of spacing, of textual generation and polysemy, of course, revolving around the Torah. Polysemy is the possibility of a 'new Torah' capable of arising out of the other" (Wright, 22).

Wright does not want to push the comparison too far, acknowledging key differences in the interpretive approaches of the Rabbis and modern writers. He qualifies that whereas the imagination of the Rabbis is, by definition, subordinate to the sacred text, modern writers have extended the canon “by an intertextual reflection that has accepted the task of memory and preservation while adding a spacious supplement that derives from its primary source a strength and daring which is anything but secondary” (Wright, 14). These new writers, seeking to appeal to postmodern readers, are far more liberal with their source text. According to scholar Harold Fisch, retelling the familiar stories of the Book of Genesis “gratifies the fundamental human need for novelty and also for sameness, for a constancy of meaning”; the result is a new narrative somewhere “between interpretation and a new invention” (Wright 15). Mann certainly straddles this divide. Fisch points out that the source text always serves as an “obsessive point of reference” even for the modern exegete, thus it asserts a degree of authority; however, he makes a critical distinction between ‘*midrashic polysemy*’—the openness of the text to multiple interpretations—and ‘*postmodern indeterminacy*’—a more liberal mode of textual reinvention (Wright 16). Mann pushes the bounds of this modern mode, granting himself an authoritative voice on the story of Joseph.

In turning to Mann’s portrayal of the encounter between Joseph and Potiphar’s wife—extended to several hundred pages of novel—I wish first, to understand specifically how he intervenes in and appropriates the work of his predecessors, and second, to explore the relationship between ‘life among the other’ and anxiety about sexuality. Mann’s novel *Joseph in Egypt* is occupied chiefly with a few verses of Genesis 39. Like the author of *The Testament of Joseph*, for example, Mann felt compelled to develop the character of Potiphar’s wife; however, instead of expanding her wickedness as the author of the *Testament* did, Mann sought to make

her sympathetic. In his Introduction, he explains this move as a “humane attempt to salvage a woman’s honor by making a humane figure of Potiphar’s wife, by telling the painful story of her passion for the Canaanite steward of her pro forma husband” (Mann, xxxviii). He goes on to describe his desire to match this character—whom he grants the name ‘Mut-em-enet’, or ‘Mut’—to the strong female characters of the other novels such as Rachel and Tamar (Mann, xxxviii).

Mundt argues that in *Mut*, Mann presents a story of unfulfilled sexuality, joining his other works with a similar theme. Mann discusses openly in the chapter his intention to correct the “false and absurd image” of Mut, “known in popular legend as a nymphomaniac” (Mundt, 147). The primary vehicle for this move is Mut’s biography; Mann explains the key detail that her husband, Potiphar, was castrated at an early age by his parents in order that he be guaranteed a position in Pharaoh’s court as a eunuch, and that their marriage was pre-arranged when they were children. Therefore Mut is forced into an “ascetic and aesthetic existence” as a virginal consort of the cult of Amun (Mundt, 147). She falls passionately in love with Joseph, and first determines to try and have him removed from the household, but in vain. Mut becomes tormented, and she is driven to revealing her love to Joseph. As a result of his repeated refusal—but, critically, his cruel manipulation of her emotions for his benefit—Mut gradually loses all dignity. At this point only does she degrade into the “irrational, vengeful woman” we are now familiar with from generations of exegetes; Mann is careful to qualify that her words, as recorded in Genesis 39, were a “final cry of ultimate psychological and physical anguish” (Mundt, 148; Mann, 815). Mundt argues that “the novel suggests that if only her husband had sent the handsome Joseph away upon her request this affliction could have been ceased, allowing an honorable ending for Mut” (Mundt, 148).

Yohannan notes that in this climactic encounter, Mann demonstrates his allegiance to Goethe's concept of a *Weltliteratur* ('world literature'), making an "ultimate effort to fuse into a single unity the diverse traditions that have formed this world story" (Yohannan, 300). Although the author certainly departs from his sources by turning Mut into a uniquely empathetic character, Yohannan argues that he alludes to Hippolytus and Phaedra, the Islamic versions of the Qur'an and the poets Firdausi and Jami (Yohannan, 299-301). Mann dismisses as inferior the flowery verses of these Persian poets, but he borrows in particular their depiction of a scene where Zuleikha (their heroine) holds a party for her female courtiers to see Joseph—and they accidentally cut themselves with knives in distraction at Joseph's beauty. Mann draws on Jami in part for his portrayal of the emasculation of Potiphar. Finally, he joins the ancient tradition which posits that at the moment of temptation, "Joseph saw the countenance of his father," although this image is described as being blurred with the features of Potiphar, his mentor Mont-kaw, and possibly even God Himself (Yohannan, 301; Mann, 1024). In general, then, Mann stands in opposition to the determination of centuries of exegetes who vilify Potiphar's wife, generally in order to elevate Joseph's piety; however, he is indebted to their work of imagining Joseph's life in Potiphar's house.

As I have explored in earlier chapters, the manner in which exegetes have portrayed the encounter between Joseph and Potiphar's wife speaks to their anxieties about sexuality and 'life among the other.' For example, the Hellenistic Jews fretted over the temptation that an exilic existence presented of adopting foreign religious practices and customs, but over the threat of exogamous sexual relations or even marriage. Thus, they turned to this narrative to present a cautionary parable against the seduction of foreign women, elevating Joseph as their model vehicle for this warning. But it is important to note that the ancient texts I have looked at thus

far—the inter-biblical reflections on Joseph, the *midrash* of the Rabbis and the pseudepigrapha of the Hellenistic Jews—are almost unanimous in that their depictions of this event reflect the patriarchal, often misogynistic, values of early Judaism. In turning to Thomas Mann, then, and the twentieth century, it is prudent to situate his depiction within the advent of feminist biblical criticism.

In 1990, the critic Harold Bloom suggested controversially in his work *The Book of J* that the author of one of the major strains of Genesis may have been a woman.³⁷ Another feminist critic, Alicia Susan Ostriker, notes the ‘disappearing women of the bible’ such as Rebecca, Rachel, Leah, Tamar and Potiphar’s wife, who demonstrate strength and initiative before making the way for male protagonists—presumably as a result of male redactors (Wright, 25). Some women have had such difficulty accepting the patriarchy of Genesis that they famously discard the text altogether, like Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Other women regard the silencing of female voices in the text as an added impetus to fill in the “pregnant silences” of the text, to “liberate Torah’s positive meanings for women” (Wright 15; 123).

For an example of a modern biblical interpreter who attempts to ‘liberate’ the voices of women in the Book of Genesis—and, in the process, comments on the relationship between sexuality and ‘life among the other’ in ways which bear weight on Mann’s project—I turn to Anita Diamant’s *The Red Tent* (1997).³⁸ Wright argues that Diamant’s retelling of the story of Dinah, Joseph’s only sister, “should be seen as part of a widespread re-reading of the Bible with its roots in the feminist movement of the previous two decades” (Wright, 123). Like Mann, Diamant draws heavily on the tradition of the Rabbis and other ancient exegetes. And like Mann, she turns consciously away from the decisions of some of these sources; however, her main point

³⁷ Rosenberg, David, and Harold Bloom, *The Book of J*, (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990).

³⁸ Anita Diamant, *The Red Tent*, (New York: Picador, 1997).

of departure is the misogyny of the Rabbis. Wright makes a key distinction between the portrayal of women in the Bible and in the *midrashim*: where the Bible depicts the ‘disappearing women’ as having a penchant for trickery and innovation parallel to that of the patriarchs, the Rabbis “simultaneously debase[] and eroticize[] these women...Diamant thus constructs an alternative lineage of powerful prophetesses who are far more than simply the wives of the patriarchs” (Wright, 125-129). Wright goes on to argue that “*The Red Tent* is no masterpiece but it is a highly significant work of fiction performing a similar function for its modern feminist audience as the misogynistic *midrash* of the ancient rabbis...to make sense of the biblical text in its new context” (Wright, 131).

Diamant’s matriarchs break with their source text in another critical way: they practice an ancient form of goddess-worship which associates sexuality with divinity. Some scholars argue that this strain of the polytheistic foundation for what became the religion of Israel was still evident in the ‘J’ material of Genesis until it was suppressed in the process of cementing the monotheistic tradition (Wright, 125). This process effectively ‘de-sacralized’ sexuality:

Whereas in ancient Sumeria the sacred rites associated with Inanna provided a religious sanction for sexual desire, in Israel, according to Frymer-Kensky, a ‘desacralization of sexuality’ took place, evident in the impurity laws, requiring all evidence of sexual activity to be removed before approaching the Temple. Other laws attempted to control or regulate sexuality, outlawing adultery, homosexuality, bestiality and any other imaginable sexual activity outside the family structure. The so-called ‘rape’ of Dinah would therefore have been objectionable to the house of Jacob not because it involved a forcing of her against her will but because of the impropriety of failing to obtain parental permission for sexual intercourse. (Wright, 125)

Diamant presents the women of Joseph's family, then, in contrast to this process: they express their sexuality freely and without shame. In reversing the tradition that Dinah was taken against her will, and demonizing the irrationally violent response of her brothers, Diamant comments on the 'silencing' of female voices in the text. In other words, whereas the stories of some women who take sexual initiative—like Tamar—are seemingly told in full, the tales are often placed within the frame of their effect on the lives of the patriarchs; women such as Dinah and Potiphar's wife rarely gain a voice of their own to tell their story. Their two or three-verse anecdotes beg for an explanation, and Diamant reacts to the response of the Rabbis with an alternative, elevating instead the matriarchs and demonizing the patriarchs. Ironically, this means that Diamant's account of Joseph and Potiphar's wife does not linger on the female voice but instead scorns Joseph, depicted as being "discovered in bed with the lovely Nebetper, Po-ti-far's wife, before being sent to prison" (Wright, 130). Diamant appropriately concludes her radical account with a blessing of Dinah on her readers, "once more appropriating to herself role normally reserved for the patriarchs" (Wright, 131).

So what does it mean, then, that Mann grants Mut not only a voice, but a sympathetic character? Mann's portrayal of Diamant's 'matriarchs' elsewhere in his novels is complex. He certainly grants a voice to three major female characters who are largely silent in the original text: Rachel, Mut-em-enet, and Tamar. In this way, Mann joins the feminist project of Diamant and her contemporaries, and stands in striking opposition to his Rabbinic forebears. But his approach is not as unilateral as either the Rabbis or Diamant's with regard to sexual politics; Mann chooses to remain faithful to the (perhaps editorial) voice in the text which discards other female characters after they have played their role in the plot—but always with an ironic tone. For example, Mann dismisses Dinah as quickly as the Book of Genesis does. He depicts her

brothers' actions as cruel and politically motivated, but Dinah herself as “an insignificant thing, submissive, lacking both good judgment and any power of resistance” (Mann, 137). When he describes the error in the text which places Dinah's name at the end of the list of Jacob's children instead of in birth order, his sarcasm is biting: “As for her place in the sequence of Jacob's descendants, it is of no real consequence what position the scribes have given her...Who is going to be so punctilious about a girl? There was no significant difference between the birth of a girl and a closed womb” (Mann, 120). Like Diamant, Mann emphasizes the ingenuity and penchant for trickery the female characters share with their male counterparts. In the theft of Esau's blessing, for example, the author qualifies Jacob's role: “A deceiver? Not he. But rather a victim of female cunning, Adam seduced by Eve, friend of the serpent!” (Mann, 107). This move makes the female characters three-dimensional and is essentially elevating; in leaving the women equally open to blame for the morally questionable steps they take in the name of God's plan, Mann grants them the same status as their husbands and sons.

Yet Mann's insistence that the character of Mut be honored is curious, since she is an Egyptian, placed in conflict with Mann's hero and ultimately responsible for his downfall. This narrative decision makes more sense, however, when viewed within the context of Mann's deeply ambiguous portrayal of assimilation in the text. He again departs from the Joseph tradition in humanizing the ‘other,’ but joins it in employing the encounter with Potiphar's wife to comment on the urgent anxieties of sexual transgression and assimilation. Jacob vilifies the paganism of Egypt, delineating for his son between their monotheistic faith with its appropriate customs and the impurity of the Egyptian cults. He draws attention to their sexual mores, suggesting even that their skin color resulted from the sexual transgression of their ancestor, Ham: “no Hamites were tolerated in Jacob's camp—because of the sin of their ancestor, who had

been turned black all over for shaming his father” (Mann, 12). All the outsiders from the Book of Genesis are lumped into this genealogy, including Hagar and the Ishmaelites; Jacob’s tirades against “monkey-faced Egypt” and “the Black Land” remind us of the rising tide of racism Mann himself was fighting against in Germany (Mann, 73). Jacob’s warnings to Joseph are almost prophetic: “If a woman goes to the market and sees a lad after whom she lusts, she lies with him” (Mann, 74). Mann refers even more explicitly to the fear of exogamy expressed by Abraham’s line when he describes Rebekah’s annoyance at Esau’s Hittite wives (Mann, 100).

Yet Mann matures the character of Joseph beyond the limits and failings of his father, implying that Jacob’s attitude towards the ‘other’ bordered on intolerance. When Joseph finds himself in the land of pagan idolaters, Mann narrates his internal dialogue between his father’s views and his own observation that the customs of these foreigners are not all that dissimilar to those of his family—for example, their comparable notions of impurity (Mann, 678). In fact, when Joseph first contemplates Mut-em-enet, he muses: “Does she belong among the good or the bad? There’s no telling from her appearance. A very great lady of Egypt. Father would disapprove of her. I’m more easygoing in my judgments, but I’m not about to be intimidated, either” (Mann, 674).

However, Mann associates Joseph with certain pagan imagery from the start and even notes that he bore a physical resemblance to Egyptians (Mann, 45). The reader first encounters Joseph blowing kisses to the moon, becoming so absorbed in his adoration that he strips nearly naked and enters an ecstatic state; Jacob reproaches him for “a lack of modesty and religious backsliding” (Mann, 75). This image, when joined with Mann’s other discussions of the physical attractiveness of Joseph to both men and women, hint at an association for Mann between Joseph’s relationship with God and sexuality. In describing the significance of the rite of

circumcision, Mann even notes: “The bond of faith with God was sexual...it had the civilizing effect of weakening the male of the human species in the direction of the feminine” (Mann, 59). Such a characterization recalls the association between sexuality and divinity in the goddess-worship roots of the Israelite faith. Joseph here is presented as outside of the de-sexualized faith of his fathers, whose lives are governed by the laws of purity; confronted with the advances of Mut, however, he returns to Jacob’s aversion to the ways of the ‘other.’

In the third volume, *Joseph in Egypt*, we see Joseph forced to confront the relationship between his faith and sexuality. The net result pulls Joseph further back into the de-sexualized religion of his father, and the foreigners he comes in contact with further in the opposite direction of vilified idolatry and impurity. For the Egyptians, Mann portrays sexual desire as an affliction; Potiphar and his wife Mut-em-enet personify this disease, which is exacerbated upon contact with Joseph (Mundt, 136). Joseph learns of the plot which trapped both Potiphar and Mut in a sexless marriage through eavesdropping on the conversation of the plotters, Potiphar’s parents. Since she has been given as a consort of the god Amun, the parents assume that Mut does not suffer from “earthly” desires; in other words, she must be sexually fulfilled by the god (Mann, 711). Mann makes it clear that this is far from the case as soon as Joseph enters the scene: “But in being bound to a chamberlain of the sun, Mut...stood apart from her womanly humanity in the same way that Potiphar stood apart from his human manliness; she led a sexual existence as hollow and devoid of fleshly honor as his was” (Mann, 883). As Mut becomes more tormented by Joseph—and more aware of her own sexuality—her body changes to become more crudely sexualized, and by implication, less beautiful. In contrast, Mann demonstrates that Joseph’s (pure) sexuality only increases his beauty.

Joseph expresses his disgust at the couple's "heathen ignorance of God" in presuming to bring their son closer to the divine through castration, suggesting that he understands that the ability to procreate is essential to God's plan (Mann, 714). And the effects of his parents' violation are truly sad in the character of Potiphar, who fears sexuality. Despite the careful flattery of Joseph and his household, he is distinctly aware of his own impotence, making his fear of cuckoldry in the sexuality of his wife more poignant (Mann, 964). Although Joseph seems to pity the effects of misguided faith on his master and his master's wife, he deftly manipulates Potiphar's insecurities to his own advantage; Mann suggests also that Joseph's penchant for 'mocking laughter' in the face of lust is bound up in his feelings of superiority and his worldly ignorance—and will help bring about his downfall.

Mann's exploration of the reasons for Joseph's ironclad chastity in the face of seduction reveals deep anxieties about his exile among the 'other' and its intrusion into his Hebrew identity. Mann argues that Joseph has seven reasons for his chastity. First, he is "betrothed to God." He implies that if he were to break that relationship, he would be more alone than he already is: he "took into account the special pain that unfaithfulness inflicts upon the lonely" (Mann, 925). Second, he is loyal to his master Potiphar, whose intelligence and humanism he admires—and to whom he has vowed fidelity; Joseph describes Potiphar as the "earthly equivalent and fleshly repetition of the wifeless, childless, lonely, and jealous God of his fathers" (Mann, 925). This bears a perplexing relationship to Joseph's disdain for the act of violence which rendered Potiphar wifeless, childless, and alone, which he views as a religious transgression. Third, he does not want to be "reduced to passive femininity" by being pursued by a woman; in his sexual maturity, Joseph would rather pursue than be pursued (Mann, 925). The

author demonstrates here Joseph's maturation from the femininity of his childhood to the masculinity of adulthood.

Fourth, Joseph is averse to the impurity of Mut: "Joseph shuddered at the thought of what Mut, an Egyptian woman, embodied in his eyes and of how a proud tradition of laws of purity warned him against mixing his blood with hers" (Mann, 925). He even connects this aversion to his status as 'chosen' and his fears of disrupting his future, saying he knew he was "not allowed to make common cause with these forbidden people" (Mann, 926). Here we see Joseph returning to the faith of his father, and indeed, his fifth reason for chastity is loyalty to Jacob. Mann qualifies that Joseph still understands that Jacob's prejudices against Egypt on account of Hagar and the sin of Ham are largely unfair, since in his observation, the people of Egypt are no worse than other pagans. However, Joseph feels that his father's fear of idolatry is legitimate: "Joseph, Jacob's son, did not want to whore after Baals" (Mann, 927). Sixth, Joseph is averse to Mut's association with pagan cult. Mann suggests this may be tied up in Jacob's prejudices, but acknowledges that Mut represents a cult of the dead, which is naturally alien to Joseph's Hebrew faith. But here, Mann notes that Joseph's chastity "was not fundamentally a self-scourging renunciation of the world of love and procreation"—in other words, as generations of exegetes have been quick to point out, Joseph is not an ascetic—because such an existence "would have corresponded very poorly with the promise to the primal father that his seed would be as numberless as kernels of dust upon the earth" (Mann, 929). Here again, Joseph understands that his people's covenant is intimately bound with procreation, although this again questions his earlier depiction of his God as "wifeless, childless, and lonely." Mann qualifies that Joseph inherited an ordinance "to preserve God's reason in these matters" (Mann, 929). In other words, God decides with whom it is acceptable to procreate.

Finally, and critically, Joseph has a fear of “baring his nakedness.” He explains that nakedness is tied to the sin of his ancestor Ham (“and Canaan, Ham’s evil son”) and, even worse, the violation by Reuben of his father’s bed (Mann, 929). He views sexual transgressions as a transgression of the rites of the father. In this fear, Mann echoes the Rabbis and several Hellenistic authors in imagining that Joseph is anxious about losing his ‘chosen’ status—about being denied a blessing, as Ham and Reuben were.

Joseph’s chastity is ultimately a defense against assimilation, and an attempt to preserve his special status. But in this text, Mann raises the question: what degree of assimilation is acceptable? Joseph’s expressed fear of exogamous relations during his defense against Mut is contradicted later in *Joseph the Provider* when he takes an Egyptian woman—who is also a virginal pagan devotee like Mut—as his wife and sires children with her. Taken independently from Joseph’s other reasons regarding property violations, the tension between this statement and his later actions is never resolved. Aseneth’s virginity is exaggerated in the same way Mut’s is initially, so much so that her arranged marriage to Joseph is construed as a sort of ceremonial rape and abduction. Just as the Hellenistic author of *Joseph and Aseneth* rationalized the exogamous union by painting it as a sacred, virginal marriage, Mann argues that Pharaoh believes that “in this case virginity was to be joined with virginity” (Mann, 1239).

Characteristically, Mann pauses in the narration to address his unapologetic portrayal of Joseph’s assimilation:

For this event to occur, he had first had to settle with the god of his fathers, the bridegroom of his tribe, whose jealousy he had long treated with consideration but would do so no longer now, or only insofar as he was entering into a special and exemplarily virginal marriage—if that was any sort of excuse. There is really no point in our worrying

about this despite all the implications such a step involved—for Joseph was indeed making an Egyptian marriage...not lacking in precedent, then, but a dubious precedent nonetheless, one requiring the indulgence that he, so it seems, confidently felt he had been granted (Mann, 1239).

Two key issues arise here. First, Joseph seems to characterize his God's prohibitions against assimilation as 'jealousy,' which makes more sense in the context of the material I explore at the end of this chapter. Second, Mann is clearly comfortable with Joseph's assimilation, which may be a reaction to the racist horrors he saw in the extremely insular mentality of the Nazi party. Joseph becomes an Egyptian, both visibly and, later, behaviorally. Mundt argues that Joseph's extreme transformation—such that his brothers no longer recognize him—does not come without cost: "This social, worldly, engagement has its price—the loss of artistic creativity, the loss of 'soul' mentioned in 'Descent into Hell,' and of intellectual leadership—and, as such, it is questionable" (Mundt, 154).

When Mann describes how "Joseph visibly becomes an Egyptian," he argues for a precedent within Joseph's own family: "There had always been relationships between his sphere and the one now enclosing Joseph—for had not the darkly beautiful Ismael taken a daughter of the mud to be his wife" (Mann, 779). Mann later elaborates:

In psychological terms, living life as a foreigner adapting himself to the 'children of the land' was nothing new, but rather as old and familiar as his own tradition, for at home he and his family, Abram's people, had always lived as *gerim* and guests among the children of the land, having long ago settled among them, joining with and adapting to them, yet always with inner reservations and a detached, sober view of the comfortable but cruel rites of Baal practiced by the real children of Canaan. (Mann, 781)

In other words, the line of Abram have always been outsiders; they are even outsiders to the land which God has promised them at some hazy point in the future. But such adaptation is acceptable as long as they maintain their ‘inner reservations,’ which Joseph demonstrates in his rejection of Mut. The transition from Hebrew to Egyptian is portrayed as facile on account of Joseph’s youth and his natural, physical tendencies towards the Egyptian. In addition, he views the task as part of his duty to succeed in this foreign land. It is an act of devotion to assimilate.

At the beginning of the final volume, *Joseph the Provider*, Mann moves away from the protagonist he has left at the depths of the pit again, and turns to the nature of God. This ‘Prelude in Higher Echelons’ rivals the opening books of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* in its elaborate painting of the rapport between God and the angels. Mann begins by explaining that on account of Joseph’s arrogance, God had been compelled to intervene in his life again, “in a complete reversal of plans and wishes” (Mann, 1041). These last words are cryptic, given what Joseph (and the narrator) have expressed thus far: that Joseph must be brought low in order to achieve the heights reserved for him by God. To explain, Mann turns to God’s motivation for creating man in the first place.

He describes how on the advice of the angel Sammael—who had other plans, namely the introduction of evil and the humiliation of the divine—God created man primarily for the purpose of the “significant growth in vitality that the Creator’s own nature would experience through it” (Mann, 1043). Mann’s God is a narcissist who finds a thrill in creating earthly beings in His image; however, to Sammael’s delight, “God created for Himself a mirror that was not very flattering” (Mann, 1044). Mann describes how man was a creature “flagrantly precarious and embarrassing” to God, whose actions required God to smite him and lay him low on occasion (Mann, 1042). Yet despite this embarrassment, “given One’s venerable obstinacy, One

then, precisely because it was an undeniably botched creation, hung One's heart all the more and attended to it with a zeal insulting to all heaven" (Mann, 1042).

God's narcissistic affection for his deeply faulty creation—and, by implication, his own faults—causes him to attach particularly to a 'chosen' group of people. Fittingly, Mann points out that these chosen men happened to reflect the divine nature most accurately, exaggerating both his virtues and failings. Consequentially, a cycle develops in which the actions of God's human likenesses require Him to punish "the compromising behavior of that 'most similar' creature," but also to reward Abraham's line extravagantly (Mann, 1045). The angels find the "treatment of rewards and punishments, with its entire nexus of favoritism, preference, election that called into question the moral world" amusing, precisely for its morally compromising effect (Mann, 1046). Samael is particularly pleased at how God must bring himself low to compete with pagan gods:

By chance, or not by chance, the character of the tribe chosen and molded to be His national embodiment was such that on the one hand, the cosmic God, by becoming its body and its God, not only forfeited His dominion over the earth's other national gods and became *like* one of them, but also ended up considerably *below* them in terms of power and glory—also to the delight of the cesspool. (Mann, 1050)

In this prelude Mann explains not only God's apparent acceptance of and adjustment to the morally compromising behavior of Joseph and his ancestors, but also His fervent prohibitions against association with paganism and idolatry. Mann ends, however, with a compliment to the chosen line: in the experience of being 'chosen,' the tribe became particularly adept at being God's vessel, seeking constantly to know God and gaining rare insight into His nature. Wright argues that "Judaism has always, of course, had a sense of God being dependent on man for the

full realization of His will”; he also argues that Mann always considered there to be much room for ‘development’ in ancient Judaism’s conception of God (Wright, 166).

This late entry into Mann’s tetralogy goes a long way towards explaining the relationship between the daily choices Joseph faces in his life and the knowledge of God’s long-term plan. Mann reiterates over and over that Joseph is quite self-conscious of his status as ‘chosen.’ This is manifested not only in Joseph’s self-conscious attempts to make choices which facilitate this role, but also in his open allusions to an assumed mythological identity. Only in the final volume does the narrator openly admit that “Joseph regarded it as his duty to encourage such plans and to assist God in their prosecution as best he knew how” (Mann, 1223). Before then, we see this admission hinted in Joseph’s obsessions over the patterns he sees in his own life, repeating both the actions of his forefathers and the motifs of the lives of mythological heroes. During the journey to Egypt, Mann observes:

But now [Joseph] was totally preoccupied with the return and resurrection of his father’s story within him. He was Jacob, his father, entering into Laban’s realm, carried off to the underworld, intolerable to those at home, fleeing before fraternal hatred, before the red man’s snorting jealousy of blessing and birthright—Esau transformed tenfold this time, that was one variant... (Mann, 669).

Similarly, during Joseph’s ascent through the ranks of Potiphar’s household, he self-consciously notes his position and just how far he has to go, “determined to achieve the heights of God’s intentions for him” (Mann, 757). Later, the narrator even suggests that Joseph presciently knows that he must be thrown down into the pit a second time in order for key opportunities to present themselves which would lead to ultimate success; he believes that this fall “could not be avoided if all things written in the book of plans were to be fulfilled” (Mann, 931).

This awareness causes Joseph to make parallels—which the narrator facilitates—between his life and mythological archetypes. In Mann’s own ‘Essays,’ he describes myth as the “foundation of life...the timeless schema, the pious formula into which life flows when it reproduces itself out of the unconscious” (Mundt, 145). Mann sees life as ‘sacred repetition.’ For example, as Joseph sits at the bottom of the well, the narrator references the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, “as well as to earlier mythical figures such as the Babylonian, Tammuz, the Greek, Adonis, and the Egyptian, Osiris; all four die and return to life” (Mundt, 145). Joseph also openly imagines himself as Gilgamesh resisting the seduction of Ishtar, and even (ironically) the hero of the Egyptian ‘Tale of Two Brothers,’ Anpu. Mundt argues that Joseph goes so far as to perform these roles, delighting in their confirmation of his creative / artistic identity.

This awareness seems to affect his every action. Critically, Mann demonstrates that Joseph’s choices are not always prudent—in other words, he does not always choose a path which is guaranteed to lead to the fulfillment of God’s plan. At these moments, God steps in to punish him. Each time Joseph is brought low, he uses his ‘chosen’ talents masterfully to ascend the ranks again; we know from God’s character that the plan will be fulfilled in spite of Joseph’s mistakes. In Mann’s novels, then, Joseph is placed in distinct contrast to his father, whose morally questionable acts, if they were punished, were not done so as openly and obviously as Joseph’s are. In fact, Jacob’s trickery and deception leads almost directly to his success, whereas Joseph succeeds *in spite of* his moral failures—because those failures are punished resoundingly.

Again we are reminded that Joseph is an ideal vessel for moral and religious parable, which is perhaps why he is a more appealing character to Mann’s imagination. The tension in Joseph’s story, then, emerges in the knowledge that God will ensure that everything works out

the way it is planned; that presumably Joseph can not screw up badly enough to throw himself off his divinely ordained course; that his mistakes serve merely to mature his character. This constructed tension, however, is questioned at one climactic moment: the seduction of Mut-emet. At that critical moment, Mann hints that had Joseph failed on more than just the level of arrogance—if he had fallen to temptation—he might have risked being abandoned by God permanently. Mundt argues the following about Mann’s mythical construct: “In *The Tales of Jacob*, Mann presents Jacob and his sons as characters whose fate is encoded in their lives, but who nonetheless can make choices, choices that will not change the course of history but will make it more humanistic” (Mundt, 142).

Each time Joseph fails, the narrator lingers on the error. In *Young Joseph*, the reader watches Joseph’s arrogance spiral out of control, landing him at the bottom of the well for the first time. During those symbolic three days, Joseph is forced “to see the fatal error of his previous life and to renounce any return to it” (Mann, 544). Mundt describes how Joseph discovers humility in the well, arguing: “destiny and self-determination, calling and self-calling are intertwined here” (Mundt, 145). In *Joseph in Egypt*, we watch Joseph toy with the tortured Mut and basically guarantee his downfall. He naively convinces himself that he needs to appear before her day after day in order to fulfill his appointed destiny, when it is more than apparent he has long since achieved high status in the household (Mann, 934). Mann describes the first offense as engendering excessive hate, and the second excessive love. The second time Joseph is thrown to the bottom of the pit, Mann is quick to note, however, that this punishment “had been so well arranged that it would serve his future good fortune, until it was greater and more brilliant than what was destroyed” (Mann, 1008). Thus we understand that for the narrator, Joseph’s errors were necessary for his success in that they guaranteed character growth; but in

thinking back to ‘Prelude in Higher Echelons,’ we know that for God, Joseph’s errors were not an intrinsic or required step to achieve his greater plan. In Mundt’s words, “the boundaries between mythical determinations and autonomous, individual decisions are unstable... Out of free will [Joseph] has acted irresponsibly, asocially, narcissistically, and thus deserves his punishment” (Mundt, 150).

Mundt’s argument is supported by Mann’s observation that had Joseph indeed committed a more egregious error and slept with Mut, all may have been lost. When Joseph first sees her, the narrator articulates this threat in an aside: Joseph had no idea “that she would cause him tears, that she would place his status as a wreath-crowned bride of God in absolute peril, and that by her folly he would, by a mere hair, miss being cut off from his God” (Mann, 675). And Joseph’s own error—in presuming that all his choices lead correctly to the predestined end—is highlighted when he wonders, albeit briefly, if God in fact intends Mut as a reward for his trials:

God had such wonderful plans for Joseph—could He actually be of a mind to begrudge him the proud and sweet delight offered him, perhaps offered by God Himself? Was this delight not perhaps the planned means for his being raised up—in the expectation of which he had lived since having been carried off—inasmuch as his advancement in the house had already raised him up so far that his mistress had now cast her eyes upon him....did she not wish to make him, as it were, lord of the world?” (Mann, 938-939)

Why does Mann suggest that this particular error would be fatal to Joseph? The easy answer points to the fear of the ‘other’ which pervades Mann’s source text, but his own characterization of Joseph’s marriage to Aseneth contradicts the idea. The problem seems to go unresolved, heightening the ambiguity which arises from a perspective on Mann’s entire project.

To complement an open discussion of Joseph's autonomous hand in his own fate, Mann discusses briefly the possibility of God's overt presence in helping the plot advance—but in the author's characteristic aversion to the supernatural, he is extremely cautious with this thread. For example, when Joseph is first presented to Potiphar's household upon his entry into Egypt, the narrator tiptoes around the issue: "It is possible—we are merely offering a supposition, not venturing an assertion—that at this very moment, on which so much depended, the planning God of Joseph's fathers went out of His way for Joseph and let fall upon him a ray of light designed to produce the desired effect in the heart of the man gazing upon him" (Mann, 650). Mann is quick to qualify, however, that "we have left the matter open and are prepared to withdraw our suggestion if so supernatural an element should appear out of place in our very natural story" (Mann, 650). At another moment in Potiphar's house, the narrator is less cautious. The opportunity for Mut's final, desperate seduction of Joseph appears during the festivities for New Years, when Joseph returns before the rest of the household to make sure 'things are in order.' The narrator derides not only Joseph for pretending not to know exactly what kind of opportunity this afforded—not just for Mut, but "to bring a matter that has become a matter of honor between God and Amun to its conclusion" (Mann, 1018). The implication in this passage is that God was actively seeking an inevitable conclusion to his battle with an earthly god, and Joseph merely provided the opening.

Mann's epic *Joseph and His Brothers* is bold in its characterization of the relationship between Joseph's actions and the divine plan. He is able to 'displace' the sacred text so confidently for several reasons. First, he is not bound to a religious tradition or purpose—nor is he engaged in a religious dialectic, removing the threat of a challenge to his characterization; he is able to bring Joseph down from his status as a moral model without theological repercussions.

Second, he has access to biblical criticism which helps him dissect the complicated history of the tradition he confronts. Mann operates in a globalized society in which insular-minded communities wreak devastating consequences, so he has a much more positive take on assimilation and contact with the 'other.' He has the advantage of being able to view the entire Joseph tradition, which means he can judge the strengths and weaknesses of each interpreter's take on Joseph and decide which work best. All these factors contribute to his ability to 'resolve' the tension inherent in the original text—and simultaneously to criticize the limitations of that text's sacred world view in flawed portraits of both God and his chosen people. Yet Mann's narrative methodology, his metafictional conversation with the reader, undermines this apparent resolution and perpetuates the tension at the heart of the Joseph narrative.

Conclusion

In the Book of Genesis, Joseph joins a distinguished line of Abrahamic patriarchs who, faced with an indefinite promise of future prosperity, become ingenious in order to gain localized—and immediately realized—success. God does not pass judgment on this ingenuity; he remains silent. In the sacred texts of the Jewish and Christian Bibles, authors attempt to move *forward*, out of the localized biographies of their patriarchal founders and into even more indeterminate space without accessible divine guidance. They look back at the lives Joseph and his ancestors for direction in the confusion of tribal and exilic life. The Rabbis similarly turn Joseph's life into parable, but with a more religious than culturally specific intent; their *midrash* amplifies the ambiguities of Genesis in almost universally relevant ways for generations of exegetes. In the pseudipigrapha of Jews in Hellenistic Egypt, each author is a pioneer of this Joseph tradition in choosing a very specific point of view and expanding it to fill in missing narrative detail in the text. They join in applying these viewpoints to the daily anxieties of 'life among the other.'

Finally, Thomas Mann chooses a fully developed point of view in his *Joseph* epic, in which God must occasionally intervene to correct the errors of his autonomous subject Joseph. Yet Joseph seems incapable of transgressing so severely that he could rupture this relationship with God; instead, Mann argues that Joseph's poor choices serve the development of his character—essentially reflecting the move of many exegetes before him who re-construe Joseph's narrative as parable. Mann's narrator enters the 'space' of the cumulative story I have just told, both intervening to at times to 'correct' its course and, at others, allowing it to proceed in all its ambiguity. In this sense, Mann plays the God of Hebrew scriptures. Although he

consciously chooses a viewpoint and constructs a sacred universe around it, the mysterious and almost schizophrenic role of the narrator extends the legacy of this unresolved tension.

From the ancient sacred texts of the Jewish and Christian traditions to the Rabbinic *midrashim*, and through Hellenized Egypt and Nazi Germany, the enigmatic figure of Joseph accrues cultural and theological meaning. His accumulation of greater and wider significance to disparate traditions seems inversely proportional to his clarity of character, however. This centuries-old process—in which even as new interpreters strive to categorize and conceptualize Joseph, his character becomes all the more inscrutable—speaks to the richness of the ambiguity and unresolved tension in his narrative; ambiguity which, it seems, is only deepened as exegetes fill in the silent spaces of the original text with the intent of clarification. As one Rabbi, for example, argues that God must be ‘with’ Joseph in Egypt because he faces urgent danger among Gentiles, another seeks to support this argument by establishing causality in the text. This second voice wants to demonstrate that Joseph’s actions could have serious consequences, but implies, instead, that Joseph is ‘without’ God in a certain sense—that despite God’s presence, he still has the power to wreak havoc in the divine plan.

As one reader of Joseph adds detail to the sparse Genesis source, construing his story towards one side of this tension, the other side inevitably emerges—even in Mann’s novels. As generations of exegetes situate Joseph’s biography into the indeterminate space of the divine plan, we see again and again a commentary on the uncertainty inherent in such a sacred construction of a divinely created human theater. Since this uncertainty generates such urgent interpretive pressure, we delight in the doubt which leads interpreters to re-imagine the story of Joseph with such nuance and detail.

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