

Vayyigash: “The Jacob-Joseph reunion and A. S. Yahuda’s challenge to the Documentary Hypothesis”

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The saga of Joseph and his brothers is moving swiftly in our sidrah towards its denouement. At the end of the last sidrah (*Mikkeitz*), Joseph instructs his chief House Steward to plant his divination cup in the sack of Benjamin while assisting the brothers to fill their sacks with all the grain they had paid for. Shortly after setting out on their journey home, the brothers are overtaken by the Steward and charged with having stolen the divination cup of the viceroy (Joseph). After a quick search confirmed Benjamin as the apparent culprit, the brothers were forcibly returned to Joseph’s presence (see ch. 44).

They prostrate themselves before him, and their spokesman, Judah, as bewildered as the rest by what has occurred, mumbles out an apology:

“What can we say to my lord? How can we speak? How can we justify ourselves? *God has uncovered the sin of your servants...*” (v.16).

The Midrash understands the latter phrase not as admission of guilt for the theft of the cup, which he knew for sure none of them – and certainly not the righteous Benjamin – would have committed, but as a long-overdue divine retribution for a heinous, collectively-perpetrated, sin, the guilt for which had lain heavily on them all for over twenty years. The Midrash articulates the thought in Judah’s mind: “The time had assuredly arrived for the creditor to call in his debt.”¹

And it was this public expression of remorse – uttered by the one whose very name, Yehudah, signified ‘acknowledgement, admission,’ and who readily admitted his own guilt for his indifference to the loneliness of his widowed daughter-in-law,

Tamar² – that triggered the process of melting the heart of Joseph and making him amenable to reconciliation with his brothers, as recounted in our sidrah.

Our sidrah also describes the meeting with King Pharaoh that Joseph arranges for the brothers (46:31- 47:4). We have already noted the recurring theme of deception that runs through the Book of Bereshit. While this applies in the context of most of the *dramatis personae* of the book, it is not generally recognised as present in terms of relations with King Pharaoh, other than in the context of the Pharaoh of the exodus whom Moses attempted to deceive by claiming that the Hebrews only sought leave for a three day furlough from work in order to offer sacrifice to their God in the desert (see Ex.5:1-3).

The situation to which we refer is that of Joseph priming his brothers for their audience with the king. Though they a family also kept cattle in the fields around their home, their work was primarily with sheep, moving them around the various grazing fields near and far. This was the background to the sale of Joseph when his father Jacob sent him on that fateful mission to go to Shechem and bring back a report on how they and the family flocks of sheep were faring (see 37:12-14). Joseph wished to impress Pharaoh and to justify the family being welcomed and invited to settle in Goshen, the prime part of the country. So, he tells them that, when the king questions them as to their line of work, they should reply that their family have been cattle herdsman for generations (46:31 - 47:6). This suggested men of considerable wealth, expertise, and contacts across Canaan, which would have appealed to Pharaoh as being beneficial to future trade relations.

However, when it came to the actual audience, the brothers told the king that they were ‘herdsmen of sheep’ (47:3), thus frustrating Joseph’s planned deception. The brothers must have really embarrassed Joseph by not keeping to the script, since, before the audience took place, he had told Pharaoh, “My father and my brothers, their flocks, *their cattle*, and everything they own, have arrived from the land of Canaan” (v.1). No reason is given for why they didn’t follow Joseph’s instruction, but, given the various trials that he had subjected them to until that point, it clearly reflects the strained relationship between them. However, such behaviour was also indicative of how headstrong they still were, to the extent that, knowing how reliant they would henceforth be on Joseph’s good will, they could nevertheless choose to embarrass him so greatly before his monarch.

However, we may indeed wonder why Joseph had to inflate his family’s wealth in that way, given that it is well documented in several places in Genesis,³ suggestive of a long-established reputation that would have preceded them to Egypt. Scholars find corroboration of that wealth in the fact that Abraham had been able to muster 318 of his own trained men to intervene and rescue his nephew, Lot, when he was captured in a regional battle involving nine kings (see Gen. 14:14), as well as in his purchase of land from Ephron the Hittite for a large sum of money (23:1-20). They infer from the Patriarch’s various dealings that he had been a wealthy merchant and a transporter of goods, with a string of caravans.⁴

Significantly, Joseph didn’t feel the need to prime them in advance regarding court etiquette, mores, and modes of address to observe at the palace and when replying to Pharaoh’s questions. Clearly the family had become well-educated in such conventions during its three generations of wheeling and dealing with the

surrounding kings and their courtiers, as well as – in the case of both Abraham and Isaac – some most unpleasant marital misunderstandings involving monarchy.⁵

Notwithstanding their ambivalent relationship, the grudging admiration of the monarchy for the influence, astuteness and achievements of the Patriarchs, and for the blessings with which their God had manifestly invested them, shines through the conciliatory words addressed by the Philistine king Avimelech to Isaac:

Avimelech came to him from Gerar, with Achuzzat his associate and Phichol chief of his troops. Isaac said to them, “Why have you come to me, seeing that you have been hostile to me, and have driven me away from you?” And they said, “We now see plainly that the Lord has been with you, and we thought: Let there be a sworn treaty between our two parties, between you and us. Let us make a pact with you that you will not do us harm, just as we have not molested you but have always dealt kindly with you and sent you away in peace. From now on, be you blessed of the Lord.” Then he made for them a feast, and they ate and drank.

(Gen. 26:26-30)

His words appear genuine and impressive, given that the king had previously banished him from the capital, Gerar, following constant strife between the shepherds of the city and Isaac’s shepherds over the ownership of wells that Isaac’s servants had dug, and because of the Philistine population’s widespread envy of his growing wealth and prosperity (see vv.12-16). The fact that the king went to Isaac’s home to placate him, rather than summoning him for an audience at his palace, confirms his respect for Isaac as a man of substance, rank, and heavenly grace, and his desire for a genuine mutual relationship with him.

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The subject of the historical authenticity of the Bible occupied the minds of Christian academics – referred to as higher critics – during the 18th and 19th centuries. They started out from the basic assumption that the Torah was not a unity or the record of a divine revelation and transmission to Moses on Sinai – the hitherto generally accepted view – but rather a compilation by several ancient scribes who had written their record of the Torah at different times, centuries later than Sinai, and in different styles. The first to articulate this view was the great Dutch philosopher, Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677).

According to their theory, the fact that some sections of the Torah use the name *Elohim* for ‘God’ while others use the Tetragrammaton (*Adonai*) – and occasionally a combination of both – or that Deuteronomy has stylistic and theological differences from the other biblical books, is to be explained on the basis that sections of the Torah had emanated from differing scribal traditions, while adopting their own unique characteristics during the course of their transmission down the ages. Thus, when the final version became generally accepted, it was a meld of the literary characteristics of those previous ‘documents’ and the sources from which they had derived their material.

This ‘Documentary Hypothesis’ was developed in earnest by Johann Eichhorn (circa 1780) of Germany, Jean Astruc of France (1753), Karl Graf and Julius Wellhausen (1860-70) of Germany, all of whom researched and worked on the criteria for assessing the chronology and dating of the biblical texts. Thus, they determined that the book of Deuteronomy, which has its own unique style, began as an independent work, written in the 7th century BCE, during the reforms of King Josiah (circa 622 BCE) as described in II Kings chs, 22 - 23:30.

We mention the above because an eminent scholar of Semitic languages, Abraham Shalom Yahuda, published a book in 1933, entitled, *The Language of the Pentateuch in its Relation to Egyptian*,⁶ which rather upset the scholarly applecart.

As an Egyptologist, among many other areas of scholarly expertise, he was convinced that the Joseph/Jacob/Pharaoh narrative of Genesis – and particularly that of the brothers' reunion (ch.47) – reflected the authentic style, spirit, vocabulary, idiomatic accuracy, and intimate knowledge of Egyptian customs and courtly etiquette, as it existed at the time of Joseph. He found, across and underlying the narrative, many examples of Hebrew words, phrases, and titles, that were clearly Egyptian in origin, but which had been Hebraised in the Genesis account.

Yahudah's conclusion was that the biblical account of this episode is not only authentic in every detail, but that it is also to be dated to the very period it describes, namely, the arrival of the family of Jacob into Egypt which scholarly consensus dates around 1660 BCE.

This constituted a direct challenge to the higher critical theory which attributed ch. 47 to a synthesis of its 'J-source' – which it dates circa 10th-9th cent. BCE – and some other material from the Priestly, 'P-source,' written much later, around 6th-5th cent. BCE. The critics also conclude that the final redaction of the reunion narrative – combining the material from those two early sources into the form of our Bereshit narrative – was as late as circa 400 BCE, some 1200 years after the period of Jacob and Joseph!

So, if Yahuda is correct – and none have yet refuted him – that the dating of the story of the reunion in our sidrah is truly contemporaneous with the events it describes – it

demolishes the claims the higher critical school makes for the attribution and dating of at least some elements of its documentary hypothesis.

NOTES

1. See Mid. *Ber. Rabb.* 92 (9), as quoted by Rashi on 44:16.
2. See Gen. 38:26.
3. See Gen. 12:16; 13:2; 24:10 (in relation to Abraham); 26:12-13 (Isaac); 30:43 (Jacob).
4. See Stephen Caesar, “The wealth and Power of the Biblical Patriarchs,” *Bible and Spade* (Associates for Biblical Research): Winter 2006, pp.1-31.
5. For examples of previous contacts between the Patriarchs and royalty, see Gen. 12:10-20, A(braham) with King Pharaoh; 14:18-20 (A. with King Melchizedek of Salem); 14:21-23 (A. with the King of Sodom); ch.20; 21:22-34 (A. with Avimelech, King of the Philistines). Ch.26 (Isaac with Avimelech, King of the Philistines); 47:7-10 (Jacob with Pharaoh); and ch.41 (Joseph with King Pharaoh).
6. A. S. Yahuda (1877-1951) was the first Jewish scholar to be appointed to a professorship in Jewish Studies at a modern Western university (Madrid). His monograph, *The Language of the Pentateuch in Relation to Egyptian*, was originally published in German in 1929, and translated into English by Oxford University Press in 1933. It attracted so much interest and controversy that he published a popular edition in 1934, entitled *The Accuracy of the Bible*.

**Shabbat shalom,
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