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**José in Egypt:
Reading Genesis 37-50 with People on the Move¹**

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Introduction

In so many ways, the complex and engaging narrative of the patriarch José that fills the pages of the last thirteen chapters of the book of Genesis is a story about changing clothes and shifting identities. From the long robe with sleeves that he receives from Jacob because he is his father's favorite son (Genesis 37:3), a garment of which he is stripped by his jealous brothers (37:23) to the garment he leaves behind after fleeing from Potiphar's wife (39:12), to the clothes into which he changes when summoned into the presence of Pharaoh to interpret his dreams (41:14), to the garments of fine linen and the gold chain that mark his investiture as second in command over Egypt (41:42), clothes mark key changes in the way José's identity is perceived by those around him, whether or not they affect how José actually sees himself. The long robe with sleeves marks him both as the favorite son of his father's old age and as the object of the violent envy of his brothers. The garment he leaves behind with Potiphar's wife serves both as

¹ An initial version of this paper was presented during the 2016 annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in San Antonio, TX. A subsequent and substantially more developed version of this paper was presented on July 17, 2019 in Buenos Aires, Argentina, during the Congreso Internacional de Estudios Bíblicos ("La exégesis en América Latina 80 años después") on the 80th anniversary of the *Revista Bíblica*, in a seminar session on the Bible and migration in which M. Daniel Carroll R. and I served as co-presenters and co-facilitators. I am grateful to Ahida Calderón Pilarski, a faculty member at Saint Anselm College, New Hampshire, and a member of the organizing committee, for her role in nominating me to participate. I am also grateful to my colleague Danny Carroll of Wheaton College for his presentation and the important insights he shared with me about this paper. I also extend my appreciation to the participants in the seminar, women and men from countries throughout Latin America, who made it eminently clear to us that migration is a hemispheric—indeed global—set of concerns and challenges.

testimony to José's faithful service in his master's household and as false evidence of alleged misconduct. The clothes into which José changes after cleaning up to be brought before Pharaoh mark the deference appropriate to the low status of a man who is still a prisoner, while the insignia that are conferred on him mark the renamed Zaphenath-Paneah as someone before whom Egyptians must bow the knee.²

I want to foreground three characteristics of this specific project that link it to and distinguish it from my earlier work about border crossings and border crossers. First, as I approach Genesis 37-50, I am very conscious of the fact that I am engaging an enormous amount of material, not just the ten verses that tell of Abram and Sarai's journey into and out of Egypt but thirteen chapters of richly textured prose. While there is a single protagonist in what has been called the Joseph novella, and while there are recurring elements that mark this material as a unified narrative (among them the use of clothing as a mark of shifting identities, as I have already noted and to which I will return in more detail), these chapters of Genesis are a vast and complex landscape. Thus, my considerations here will necessarily be very selective, focusing on just a few of the many issues that could be surfaced, and offering one modest reading.³

² See Victor H. Matthews, "The Anthropology of Clothing in the Joseph Narrative." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 65 (1995): 25-36; Emmanuel O. Nwaoru, "Change of Garment: a Symbolic 'Rite of Passage' in Joseph Narrative (Gen 37; 39; 41)," *Biblische Notizen* 143 (2009): 5-22; Bernd Schipper, "Gen 41:42 and the Egyptian Background to the Investiture of Joseph," *Revue Biblique* 118 (2011): 331-338; Susanne Binder, "Joseph's Rewarding and Investiture (Genesis 41:41-43) and the Gold of Honour in New Kingdom Egypt," in J. J. Shirley, Dan'el Kahn, and Shay Bar, eds., *Egypt, Canaan and Israel: History, Imperialism, Ideology and Literature: Proceedings of a Conference at the University of Haifa, 3-7 May 2009* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 44-64.

³ On the hermeneutics of otherness and engagement, the approach to texts and readers that underlies the reading proposed here, see Jean-Pierre Ruiz, *Readings from the Edges: The Bible and People on the Move* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 6-8, 84-85.

Second, I will be offering a synchronic reading of Genesis 37-50. With Jakob Wöhrle (among others), I recognize that “the Joseph story is the product of a long-term redactional development.”⁴ I also recognize, along with Wöhrle, that likelihood that “the different redactional levels of the Joseph story present very different views on life in a foreign land and among the people of a foreign land.”⁵ Be all that as it may, it is not only possible but productive to read the text synchronically, that is, as something of a unified whole in its final form, sidestepping ongoing debates over the complexities of redaction that continue to preoccupy scholarly interpreters of the Pentateuch.⁶

Third, this is a reading in which I am making a very deliberate effort to be acutely attentive to the world in front of the text, that is, to the flesh and blood readers who engage this text as one dimension of their efforts on many fronts to make sense of the landscapes of their own lives. What I offer is one possible reading among many other such readings.⁷ In effect, this is a reading of the story of José in Egypt that is taking place at a time when the border between

⁴ Jakob Wöhrle, “Joseph in Egypt: Living under Foreign Rule according to the Joseph Story and its Early Intra- and Extra-Biblical Reception,” in Rainer Albertz and Jakob Wöhrle, eds., *Between Cooperation and Hostility: Multiple Identities in Ancient Judaism and the Interaction with Foreign Powers*, Journal of Ancient Judaism Supplements 11 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 54.

⁵ Wöhrle, “Joseph in Egypt,” 54-55.

⁶ See Wöhrle, “Joseph in Egypt,” 54, n. 3.

⁷⁷ Among them is Carole R. Fontaine’s “‘Here Comes This Dreamer’: Reading Joseph the Slave in Multicultural and Interfaith Contexts,” in Athalya Brenner, Archie Chi Chung Lee, and Gale A. Yee, eds., *Genesis* (Texts@context; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 131-145. Fontaine writes, “Our hero is a survivor of human trafficking who becomes a successful state food aid distributor. He then colludes to enslave people in their own lands in return for the bread he has stored up with God’s help. Can the modern trade of trafficking shed any light on the shadows lying beneath the cloaks of many colors that interest scholars in Joseph?” Also see Gerald West and Thulani Ndlazi, “Leadership and Land: A Very Contextual Interpretation of Genesis 37-50 in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa,” in Brenner, Lee, and Yee, *Genesis*, 175-190.

the U.S. and Mexico is a site of tremendous injustice and unspeakable suffering, and it is a reading that takes place in a nation where millions continue to live in well-founded fear of deportation, where elementary school students crying at their desks because they are afraid they will go home to find that their parents have been taken away, and where many thousands languish amid the inhumane conditions of detention centers awaiting an uncertain future. We read the story of José in Genesis acutely aware of how the book of Exodus begins:

Now a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, ‘Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land. (Exodus 1:8-10 *NRSV*).

Who can read this in the days after the 2016 U.S. presidential election and not call to mind the frightening words of another powerful man, “We have some bad bad people in this country that have to go out. We have some bad hombres here and we’re going to get ‘em out.”⁸ From the lips of pharaohs and presidents alike, xenophobia is xenophobia!

“They Did Not Recognize Him”

I would ask us to focus on one strange detail in the story of José in Egypt, the very beginning of José’s first encounter with his brothers:

Now Joseph was governor over the land; it was he who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph’s brothers came and bowed themselves before him with their faces to the ground. When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them, but he treated them like strangers and spoke harshly to them. “Where do you come

⁸ “Donald Trump: deport ‘bad hombres,’” video, AP via *The Guardian*, October 26, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/video/2016/oct/20/donald-trump-bad-hombres-us-presidential-debate-las-vegas-video>.

from?” he said. They said, “From the land of Canaan, to buy food.” Although Joseph had recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him. Joseph also remembered the dreams that he had dreamed about them. (Genesis 42:6-9 *NRSV*)

As it opens, the scene is fraught with dramatic tension: how will José deal with those whom he recognizes as the men who sold him into slavery? How is it that José recognizes them but that they do not recognize him? Can it be that he has changed so much in the thirteen years since they last saw their now thirty-year-old brother? We find clues to the answer first in what the text tells us about Egyptian attitudes toward Hebrews. It is Potiphar’s wife who supplies the first such clue. After José had fled from the house,

she called out to the members of her household and said to them, “See, my husband has brought among us a Hebrew to insult us! He came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice; and when he heard me raise my voice and cry out, he left his garment beside me, and fled outside. Then she kept his garment by her until his master came home, and she told him the same story, saying, “The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us, came in to me to insult me; but as soon as I raised my voice and cried out, he left his garment beside me, and fled outside.” (Genesis 39:14-18 *NRSV*)

The accusation changes subtly but significantly in its two tellings: to the members of her household, it is her husband who is to blame, for bringing “a Hebrew among us” whose very presence—as a Hebrew—is an insult to her entire household. Yet her husband does not receive exactly the same story: in this retelling it is José who is at fault. According to Potiphar’s wife, the blame is on José, who “came in to me to insult me.”

We find a second clue to Egyptian attitudes toward Hebrews in the second encounter between the still-unrecognized José and his brothers when he orders his attendants, “Serve the meal.” The text continues, “They served him by himself, and them by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves, because the Egyptians could not eat with the Hebrews, for that is an abomination to the Egyptians” (43:32 *NRSV*). As the Hebrew-in-disguise does not share the table with his own brothers, the text gives us no clue about what José might have thought or how he might have felt about his own deliberate complicity in xenophobic table etiquette.

When José’s brothers return to Canaan after their first encounter with him, their report to their father Jacob confirms their failure to recognize their brother. They tell Jacob, “The man who is lord of the land spoke harshly to us and accused us of spying on the land” (42:30 *JPS*). In 42:23 the narrator further clarifies that there is deliberate concealment of his identity on José’s part: “They did not know that Joseph understood them, since he spoke with them through an interpreter.”

Not only had José come to speak like an Egyptian; he had also come to look like one too. Genesis 41:14 tells us, “Then Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and he was hurriedly brought out of the dungeon. When he had shaved himself and changed his clothes, he came in before Pharaoh” (*NRSV*). This is the only instance in the Pentateuchal narratives where the verb “shave” (גלח) occurs, suggesting that what is involved here is more than a matter of the prisoner sprucing himself up before entering the royal court.⁹ It is, more likely than not, an initial effort on José’s

⁹ See Lisbeth Fried, “Why Did Joseph Shave?” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 33 (2007): 36-41; Schipper, “Gen 41:42 and the Egyptian Background to the Investiture of Joseph.” Philip Yoo points to the Egyptian background of Genesis 43:1a, the only instance in the Hebrew Bible of someone washing her or his face: “Why Does Joseph Wash his Face,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 38 (2013): 3-14.

part to keep from looking like a Hebrew when he is brought into the royal court. When he succeeds in interpreting Pharaoh's dreams, the transformation of José from Hebrew slave to Egyptian potentate is confirmed by his investiture: "Removing his signet ring from his hand, Pharaoh put it on Joseph's hand; he arrayed him in garments of fine linen, and put a gold chain around his neck" (41:42 *NRSV*).

On top of that, Pharaoh confers on José an Egyptian name, Zaphenath-Paneah, and gives him an Egyptian woman, the daughter of a priest, for a wife (41:45). Yet in the man who looks so Egyptian that his brothers recognize him only as "the man who is lord of the land," there is still something of José the Hebrew. He is groomed like an Egyptian, clothed with the regalia of an Egyptian official before whom Egyptians must bend the knee, renamed with an Egyptian name, and married to the daughter of an Egyptian priest, yet José's assimilation goes only so far. He does not claim the interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams as his own achievement, deflecting the credit by saying, "It is not I; God (*Elohim*) will give Pharaoh a favorable answer" (41:16 *NRSV*). The names he gives the sons born of his Egyptian wife are Hebrew names, not Egyptian ones: "Joseph named the firstborn Manasseh, 'For,' he said, 'God (*Elohim*) has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house.' The second he named Ephraim, 'For God (*Elohim*) has made me fruitful in the land of my misfortunes'" (41:51-52 *NRSV*). At this point in the story, José has no idea that the dreams of his youth will soon come to pass, that his past will become his present once again, that his brothers will in fact come and bow down before him (37:6-10; 42:6). Unlike Ruth, who returns with her mother-in-law from her native Moab to Bethlehem, insisting "your people shall be my people, and your god, my god" (Ruth 1:16 *NRSV*), José does not embrace the gods of Egypt as his own, and when he finally discloses his identity to his brothers, he reassures them, "Do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold

me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life ... it was not you who sent me here, but God (*Elohim*); he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of his house, and ruler over all the land of Egypt” (Genesis 45:5-8 *NRSV*).

Eventually, it is the fact that José could “pass” for an Egyptian—and a highly influential one at that—which makes it possible for him to arrange for his father, his brothers, and their families to settle in Egypt. It is his insider knowledge of Egyptian attitudes that makes it possible for him to coach his brothers for their audience before Pharaoh: “When Pharaoh calls you, and says, 'What is your occupation?' you shall say, 'Your servants have been keepers of livestock from our youth even until now, both we and our ancestors'—in order that you may settle in the land of Goshen, because all shepherds are abhorrent to the Egyptians.” In effect, it is only the esteem in which José is held among the Egyptians that makes it possible for him to intervene directly with Pharaoh on behalf of his family. He becomes an anchor-sibling, so to speak, using his position in the Egyptian court to clear a path for his family to obtain what they need.

Referring to the protagonist of Genesis 37-50 as “Joseph the Assimilator,” Aaron Wildavsky argues that the José stories “reflect a conflict between different forms of Judaism, one urging assimilation, except in religion, the other demanding social separation as a support for religion.”¹⁰ I would argue instead that what we find in Genesis 37-50 is not assimilation at all, but accommodation. Clothes don’t make the man, whether it is the goats’ blood-soaked long robe with sleeves that José’s brothers use to lie to Jacob about the fate of his son (Genesis 37:31-34) or the fine linen and the gold chain with which the Pharaoh adorns the Hebrew interpreter of dreams (Genesis 41:42).

¹⁰ Aaron Wildavsky, *Assimilation versus Separation: Joseph the Administrator and the Politics of Religion in Biblical Israel* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1993), 191.

Much as he looks like an Egyptian, and much as he may have learned to talk like an Egyptian so as to keep from being disparaged as a Hebrew, José never *becomes* Egyptian, and at the end of his long life he pleads with his brothers to carry his bones with them when they go up from Egypt to the land promised by God to Abraham, Isaac; and Jacob (Genesis 50:24), the land where José had brought the body of his own father for burial. For flesh and blood readers in the worlds in front of the text, José's hybrid identity is a familiar coping strategy, the kind of double-consciousness of which W.E.B. Du Bois wrote, "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."¹¹ It is important to note that at no point in the narrative does José *ever* choose his own clothing. Others decide how he is going to be dressed or undressed, whether it is his father Jacob or the Pharaoh. Zaphenath-Paneah is still José in disguise, who knows full well that his Hebrew native costume—so to speak—won't get him very far while he is across the border in Egypt for who knew how long. Though he dresses like an Egyptian in order to pass, he still prays in Hebrew, for "God has made me fruitful in the land of my misfortunes" (Genesis 41:42 *NRSV*).¹²

Conclusion

What might the story of José the dreamer, José the border-crosser, José the Hebrew who passes for an Egyptian, José the crafty negotiator on behalf of his rediscovered family (the anchor-sibling), have to say to readers on the border between Mexico and the U.S. during the

¹¹ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, intro. Jonathan Scott Holloway (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 5.

¹² See Hyun Chul Paul Kim, "Reading the Joseph Story (Genesis 37-50) as a Diaspora Narrative," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 75 (2013): 219-238. See also Lawrence M. Wills, *The Jew in the Court of the Foreign King: Ancient Jewish Court Legends*, Harvard Dissertations in Religion 26 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

Trump administration? What will happen to immigrants who dress differently in this era of a “new king who did not know Joseph”? What advice might the patriarch have to offer refugees and asylum seekers about the double consciousness with which they must clothe themselves lest they find themselves clothed in detention center jumpsuits? What can I say to my U.S.-born hijab wearing students when a Trump supporter—Carl Higbie—points to the internment of persons of Japanese origin during World War II as precedent for the proposal seriously advanced by Trump policy advisors to enact a registry for Muslims?¹³ All other things being equal, would José have passed the ideological screening that then-candidate Trump called for as a matter of “extreme, extreme vetting?”¹⁴ What would a latter-day José need to do in order to survive in these times of ours?

¹³ Mark Abadi and Maxwell Tani, “Megyn Kelly shut down a Trump supporter who said Japanese internment camps were precedent for a Muslim registry,” *Business Insider*, November 16, 2016, <http://www.businessinsider.com/megyn-kelly-muslim-registry-2016-11>.

¹⁴ Joseph Tanfani, “What Donald Trump means when he proposes 'extreme vetting' for would-be immigrants” *Los Angeles Times*, August 16, 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/politics/la-na-pol-trump-extreme-vetting-20160816-snap-htlstory.html>.