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### The politics of the dreamscape

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## Chapter 2

### Dreams and Power between Jacob and Joseph, a Speculative Interpretation

#### Introduction

In Chapter 1, I discussed the idea of the “origins of the dreamscape” in terms of a space that opens up with the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden and the creation of the postlapsarian conditions of labor. In these circumstances, the dreamscape offers an alternative to the new ideological and economic order, retaining elements of the primordial chaos or “deep”—the force of disorder or non-creation—as well as the multifaceted desire that provokes Eve’s rebellion against the Edenic order or what I term paradisiacal authoritarianism. In the rest of Genesis and the subsequent Hebrew scriptures, the dangers of the opening of the dreamscape toward these radical forces are mitigated by the intrusion of God either directly into the realm of dreaming or indirectly by means of fashioning and interpreting dream-texts, with the latter often done by surrogates like Joseph and Daniel. In this chapter, I focus on how the tension between the dreamscape as radical space and the dreamscape as the terrain of God’s conquest opens up a critical fault-line in the Joseph story—a fault-line that splits the narrative into two interpretive layers. The first layer forms the basis of the conventional understanding of the Joseph story, which I will outline below. The second layer, concealed beneath the first as what I call a “spectral ur-text,”<sup>25</sup> contains the remnants of a more radical tradition, one that stands opposed to the narrative logic of the final redaction of the Pentateuch and to nearly the entirety of later monotheistic traditions, with the exception of some gnostic or mystical variants. In the conventional story, Joseph emerges as a fourth patriarch and national hero. In the radical version, Joseph is a tyrant and the chief opponent to Jacob. While there has been extensive discussion of Joseph as a tyrant in the political sense, I argue that the tensions go much deeper and relate to two alternate concepts of faith. Joseph is the powerful transitional force that pushes the biblical story away from the type of religiosity presented in Jacob’s dream-vision of the ladder and toward the binding of the Hebrew people to God through a conception of the Lord’s control of

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<sup>25</sup> I am using this term as a metaphor or symbol, not as a claim that there was a definitive earlier text. My aim is to posit the potentiality of a counter-force to the dominant narrative thrust of the Joseph epic. In this sense, the “ur-text” refers to the kind of energy that exists in the text but that is unaccounted for in the standard interpretations of the story, both those that see the Joseph “epic” as basically self-contained and those that posit that it is an assemblage.

history and the divine law, a binding that also gives rise to the power structure of the priesthood and ultimately to the political might of the kings.<sup>26</sup>

By identifying a deeper conflict between Jacob and Joseph in Genesis, I am able to propose a new way of contrasting the dreams related to each character. Joseph's dreams and his role as a dream interpreter create the structure for the divinely controlled philosophy of history that sets the stage for the Exodus story. This leaves Jacob's dream of the ladder as the only moment of dreaming in Genesis that cannot be assimilated into this structure. I do not think this is accidental. The continued existence of Jacob's dream of the ladder points to its inherent power in the context of pre-Joseph faith. Its marginalization by the overlaying of Joseph's dream structure indicates that its power is dangerous to the new theological structure. While there is no way to definitively define the nature of the power or meaning of Jacob's dream of the ladder, this chapter argues that the dream offers a glimpse of an anarchic religiosity based on notions of equality, immediacy, and intensity of experience. The slave spiritual "We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder" discussed in the Introduction, which understands Jacob's dream of the ladder as a vision about power, about challenging the structures of domination, comes closer to its essence than did either the post-biblical exegetes or the liberal academicians of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

### **Joseph the Provider**

In his introduction to the book of Genesis in the *Jewish Study Bible*, Jon Levenson says of the story of Joseph that, it "represents a narrative so coherent and so continuous that it has justly been termed a novella" (10). Levenson contrasts the coherence and continuity of the Joseph tale to the fractured and contradictory nature of much of the first book of the Bible. While the fractured and contradictory parts of Genesis have received a steady stream of commentary for thousands of years, the seemingly straightforward Joseph story has garnered relatively little theological or philosophical interest.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> The main line of debate about Joseph-as-tyrant has to do with his actions as the deputy of the Pharaoh in terms of demanding land and livestock in return for grain (Fuller, "Debt-Slavery" 1770-1778). I agree with Lerner, who in "Joseph the Unrighteous" shows how subtle anti-Joseph rhetoric works in the scenes about the distribution of grain to the Egyptians. This perspective provides a counterpoint to readings of Joseph as a representation or defense of monarchical politics (Carr, *Reading the Fractures* 300-305).

<sup>27</sup> This is not to say that there has not been any. Source criticism of the Joseph epic has centered on the position of chapters 38 and 49 in Genesis, the question being whether they belong in the cohesive narrative or are interpolations or interruptions. See, for example, Golka, "Genesis 37-50."

Exposition of the Joseph “novella,” the sequel to the story of Jacob, has followed the plot and logic of the biblical narrative. This conventional view runs along the following basic lines, picking up the story with Jacob in his uncle Laban’s camp. While in camp, Jacob has a total of thirteen children, seven with his first wife Leah, two with Leah’s handmaiden, two with the handmaiden of Rachel, his second wife and Leah’s younger sister, and finally two with his preferred Rachel. It is clear from the biblical account that since Rachel is Jacob’s preferred wife (he was tricked by Laban into marrying Leah), Joseph and his younger brother Benjamin, Rachel’s offspring, are his favored children. As the oldest son of Jacob’s favored wife, Joseph becomes the most favored son and heir apparent to the patriarchal lineage stretching back to Abraham. Rachel dies from complications from the birth of Benjamin as the family journeys from Bethel to the land of Canaan.

The story picks up again with Joseph tending the family flocks together with the children of Bilhah and Zilpah, the handmaidens of Rachel and Leah. We learn that Joseph tells on his brothers for some sort of bad behavior. We also learn that Jacob has demonstrated his preference for Joseph by making him an “ornamented tunic”—the famous coat of many colors.<sup>28</sup> The point of this opening to the Joseph story is on the surface quite obvious: there is seething conflict brewing between Joseph and his older brothers. Importantly, Joseph’s narration of his first dreams acts as the catalyst for transforming the brothers’ jealousy and hostility into active violence:

Once Joseph had a dream which he told to his brothers; and they hated him even more. He said to them, “Hear this dream which I have dreamed: There we were binding sheaves in the field, when suddenly my sheaf stood up and remained upright; then your sheaves gathered around and bowed low to my sheaf.” His brothers answered, “Do you mean to reign over us? Do you mean to rule over us?” And they hated him even more for the talk about his dreams.

He dreamed another dream and told it to his brothers, saying, “Look, I have had another dream: And this time, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to

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<sup>28</sup> While the traditional translation of the *ketonet passim* as “coat of many colors” has been challenged in the critical literature, I still use it here. Whether it is a coat of many colors, a long-sleeve coat or shirt, or something else, the point is that it is a distinguishing garment. See Koelb, who analyzes the *ketonet passim* in light of Thomas Mann’s Joseph novels.

me.” And when he told it to his father and brothers, his father berated him, “What,” he said to him, “is this dream you have dreamed? Are we to come, I and your mother and your brothers and bow low to you on the ground?” (Berlin 75)

The brothers, fueled by Joseph’s seeming declaration of superiority—and a perhaps veiled threat to vault from his place in the birth order to claim the mantle of Jacob’s primary heir—conspire to harm him: “They said to one another, ‘Here comes that dreamer! Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; and we can say, ‘A savage beast devoured him.’ We will see what comes of his dreams!’” (Berlin 75). Persuaded by one of the brothers, Reuben, not to kill Joseph, the brothers instead sell him into slavery to a passing caravan of Ishmaelites. The Ishmaelites take Joseph to Egypt, where he is sold again to Potiphar, a member of the Pharaoh’s court.

Joseph’s dreams combine two basic ancient dream types (Oppenheim 184-217; Noegel 45-46). First, they are symbolic dreams, containing a hidden or coded message. The sheaves of wheat stand for something, as do the celestial bodies. At the same time, these dreams are prophetic; they indicate something about the future. In the dreams, it is revealed that Joseph will lord over his family, which indeed happens later on. The message presents accurate information that seems to have a divine source. The existence of both symbols and prophecy in a dream points to a divine origin. Though Jacob and the brothers do not explicitly recognize it (and perhaps do not understand it) readers know that the dreams accurately predict what follows—Joseph’s rise to power in Egypt and the family’s (and the region’s) salvation by his intervention on their behalf. These first dreams establish Joseph as a person with a relationship to God and access to the divine realm. This immediately substantiates his favored status by Jacob. Jacob and God see Joseph as the next in line, a line that runs from Abraham and Isaac, through Jacob, to Joseph and eventually to Moses. The first dreams place Joseph squarely in this history, thrusting him forward as the continuation of the patriarchal tradition. This status is sealed in the Genesis account, Michael Avoiz argues, through Joseph’s public kiss of his dead father after the reconciliation in Egypt. After the death of the head of the family, Joseph receives an exalted status, and as a result,

his brothers fear him greatly (Gen. 50,15). Joseph’s status as the preferred son was constructed gradually: in chapter 37 he receives the striped shirt; in chapter 48 Jacob

actually adopts Joseph's sons; in chapter 49,22-26 Jacob gives him a special blessing. Chapter 50 continues this line and *Joseph actually becomes the patriarch*, immediately after the kiss. Nonetheless, Joseph does not abuse his power against his brothers. (Avoiz 245, emphasis mine)

At the same time, the story seems to present Joseph in a fairly unsympathetic way. When the story first presents him in Canaan, he is bringing "bad reports of [his brothers] to their father" (Avoiz 74). In both the ancient and modern imagination, there is little good that can be said of being a tattletale. Instead of being humble and gracious as the favored son, Joseph seems to act in an arrogant fashion. His inability to take a more thoughtful or considered approach when dealing with his brothers strikes the reader (and Jacob) as dangerous and stupid.

The portrait that emerges from these early accounts of Joseph in Canaan seems to present a nuanced view. He is a young man who is chosen by both God and Jacob, the patriarch of God's chosen people. The implication is that Joseph is a man of God, a man of righteousness. Despite this, he seems little aware of his position. He does not or cannot interpret his own dreams. The reader does not get a sense that Joseph understands the dreams or that he is aware of their divine significance. He betrays his brothers, shows off his tunic, and seemingly innocently narrates his dreams. The conventional understanding of Joseph accepts this composite portrait as being one of unusual emotional and psychological depth, which causes it to stand out in Genesis (Carr 273). The good, godly, though young, naïve and perhaps arrogant Joseph has been treated ruthlessly by his ungodly and much less sophisticated brothers. The elderly Jacob is cast as the secondary victim, receiving the torn and bloody tunic from the brothers with deep lamentations.

The link between God and Joseph becomes explicit when Joseph arrives in Egypt and is sold to the house of Potiphar, a courtier of the Egyptian Pharaoh. Joseph is placed as head of Potiphar's household, and because the "Lord was with him," everything of Potiphar's starts to thrive (Berlin 78). Unfortunately for Joseph, his good looks and healthy physique get him into trouble by attracting the attention of Potiphar's wife. She will not leave Joseph alone and, upset by his constant rejections, falsely accuses him of trying to rape her. Potiphar, incensed, responds to the accusation by siding with his wife and putting Joseph in prison.

But God is with Joseph—meaning that God is watching over Joseph and orchestrating events, even seemingly untoward events, with an eye on their grander purpose. Under God's

benevolent eye, Joseph manages to excel even in prison, becoming the caretaker of other prisoners. This status is important because after some time, the Pharaoh's cupbearer and personal baker are placed under his charge. Each servant of the Pharaoh, after being in prison for some time, has a dream that he cannot understand. Joseph, seeing the dour expressions of their faces, offers to help. When they tell him the two dreams, Joseph correctly predicts that the cupbearer will be spared and returned to Pharaoh's service while the baker will be tortured and killed. Unlike before, Joseph is now able to interpret dreams, to understand their symbolism, to determine the nature of the prophecy, and, more broadly speaking, knows that the dreams are messages constructed by God. God has planted these dreams in order for Joseph to reveal their meaning. In prison, Joseph comes to understand that his fate is determined by the unfolding of God's will.

Two years after the cupbearer's return to Pharaoh (at which time he forgets about Joseph completely) Pharaoh experiences troubling dreams. He sends for his court magicians and wise men, but none can make any sense of them. At this point, the cupbearer remembers Joseph and his ability to discern the meaning of dreams and the nature of the prophecy they contain. Pharaoh immediately sends for Joseph and tells him his famous two dreams:

Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "In my dream, I was standing on the bank of the Nile, when out of the Nile came up seven sturdy and well-formed cows and grazed in the reed grass. Presently there followed them seven other cows, scrawny, ill-formed, and emaciated – never had I seen their likes for ugliness in all the land of Egypt! And the seven lean and ugly cows ate up the first seven cows, the sturdy ones; but when they had consumed them, one could not tell that they had consumed them, for they looked just as bad as before. And I awoke. In my other dream, I saw seven ears of grain, full and healthy, growing on a single stalk; but right behind them sprouted seven ears, shriveled, thin, and scorched by the east wind. And the thin ears swallowed the seven healthy ones. I have told the magicians, but none has an explanation for me." (Berlin 81-82)

Upon hearing this, Joseph immediately understands and explains to Pharaoh that God has sent him a coded message. The two dreams mean the same thing. The seven cows and seven ears of grain symbolized seven years. The fat cows and healthy ears stand for seven years of plenty. The

emaciated cows and scorched ears symbolized seven years of drought and famine. The fact that the same message has occurred twice means that God is very serious about it. Joseph tells Pharaoh, “It means that the matter has been determined by God, and that God will soon carry it out” (82).

The dream interpretation opens up the doors to power to Joseph. Pharaoh heeds the warning and appoints Joseph to oversee the growing and husbanding of grain during the plentiful years, and the distributing and rationing of grain during the lean ones. The plan works wonderfully, not only preserving the kingdom and its people through difficult times but also in expanding the Pharaoh’s control over the kingdom and vastly increasing his wealth, for petitioners for grain must compensate Pharaoh with goods and land. As a reward for his service, Pharaoh gives Joseph the name Zaphenath-paneah, meaning “God speaks, he lives” or “creator of life” (83). He is also given a wife, Asenath, the daughter of Poti-phaera, the priest of On. In general, Joseph is described as rising to such heights of power—with the title of vizier—that only Pharaoh stands above him. His power is such that when famine hits, the Pharaoh tells the Egyptians, “Go to Joseph; whatever he tells you, you shall do” (83).

Because of Joseph’s foresight, people start to flock to Egypt for food during the seven years of famine. As it happens, Joseph’s brothers arrive in Egypt in search of food to buy. After some scenes of testing, games, and family drama, Joseph reveals his identity to them and they reconcile. The Israelites resettle from Canaan to Egypt. Before embarking from Canaan, God makes a promise to Jacob *in a dream* that he will bring his people out of Egypt in the future—a reference to the Exodus and to God’s command of the entire historical narrative, present, past, and future.

### **Conflict in Canaan**

A closer look at the Joseph narrative generates many questions that cannot be parried by referring to the emotional or psychological sophistication of the characters but which ultimately point to a deeper rift between the text and what I call its “prehistory,” an “ur-text” that casts shadows on the codified composite. The most significant moment of narrative tension comes with young Joseph’s telling his dreams to his brothers and father. How could it be that Jacob and his older sons fail to recognize Joseph’s dreams as divine in origin? While the reader understands



the dreams as symbolic and prophetic, Jacob and the brothers do not seem to get the message.<sup>29</sup> This lack of awareness is quite startling. It cuts against the coherence of both the biblical understanding of dreaming (including Jacob's understanding on other occasions) and the broader conceptualization of dreaming throughout ancient Mesopotamia and Egyptian cultures.<sup>30</sup>

By Joseph's time, dreams have played a vital role in the lives of the Hebrew patriarchs. God communicates directly with Abram (Abraham) in the Genesis 15:12-16, providing prophecy and displaying God's control over time and history. To Isaac, it seems God also appears in a dream at Beer-sheba: "That night the Lord appeared to him and said, 'I am the God of your father Abraham. Fear not, for I am with you, and I will bless you and increase your offspring for the sake of My servant Abraham'" (Berlin 55). More directly and importantly, Jacob receives a vision and communicates directly with God as he flees his father's house after the great deception of Isaac and betrayal of Esau, the "stairway" or "ladder" dream (Berlin 58-59). Many other places in the biblical text add to the understanding of the dream as a corridor for divine communication, for example the subsequent dreams of the prisoners and the pharaoh in the Joseph text, the prophet Nathan's dream about David's plan to build a temple, Solomon's incubation dream at Gideon, and Daniel's interpretation of the dreams of Nebuchadnezzar.

The Bible also contains the idea of "false" dreams—even fake dreams—and spurious interpretation. In the book of Jeremiah, God is recorded to have said:

I have heard what the prophets say, who prophesy falsely in My name: "I had a dream, I had a dream." How long will there be in the minds of the prophets who prophesy falsehood—the prophets of their own deceitful minds—the plan to make My people forget My name, by means of the dreams which they tell each other, just as their fathers forgot My name because of Baal? (974)

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<sup>29</sup> Some scholars of biblical dreams present the reaction of Jacob and the brothers on purely an emotional level without thinking about the broader implications of this scene (Zeitlin 2). Others assert, though without convincing argumentation, that the brothers and Jacob understand Joseph's dreams as originating from God. Scott Noegel writes, "Even Joseph's family is able to understand his enigmatic dreams," (45) as evidence of the split between insiders' and outsiders' ability to connect to the divine message. The problem is that while the brothers and Jacob certainly see the prophetic structure of the dreams, they do not explicitly attribute to the dream divine origins. Even in sophisticated political readings of Genesis, like Carr's, this failure of explicit recognition of the dreams by Jacob in the brothers is not directly addressed. Carr writes, "Within the context of this ongoing, irresistible rise of Joseph, the brothers' defiance of his dreams looks foolish..." (275). This gap in analysis is magnified by the fact that Jacob sends Joseph out into the field, knowing the brothers' anger.

<sup>30</sup> The notion of the divine presence in the dreamscape is common in both prophetic and symbolic dreams in the ancient world. See Oppenheim.

Solomon Zeitlin argues that God’s direct speech here is not slandering the prophets as liars or intentional deceivers. Rather, Zeitlin believes, the prophets are simply misinterpreting dreams—or they are mistakenly seeing prophecy in dreams that are being generated as reflections of their internal desires.<sup>31</sup> Despite Zeitlin’s claim, there is no evidence in the Bible for a conception of dreaming that is psychological, mundane, or that is an expression of an individual character’s private wishes, longings, or repressed yearnings. Considered in this light, the failure of Jacob and the brothers to recognize the divine nature of Joseph’s dreams indicates one of two things, or both. It was either a) a denial of God’s prophecy and Joseph as legitimate prophet or b) an accusation that Joseph is acting as a false prophet, that his “dreams” were fabricated to buttress his claim to leadership of the clan—a very serious accusation. Seen in this way, the seriousness of this encounter is heightened far above what is understood in the conventional reading of the Joseph story. I want to suggest that the potential conflict between Jacob and Joseph reveals itself in an analysis of the narrative framing Joseph’s dreams as concerning fundamental attributes of the faith. I will expand on these two possible motives after situating the dreams scenes in context.

The seriousness of dreaming and dreaming’s connection to the divine realm is ubiquitous throughout ancient Mesopotamian and Near Eastern literature. This literature provides an important frame to the discussion of Joseph’s dreams, his interpretations, and other’s reactions to both. The key linkage in this literature is the relationship between a god or gods, a ruler figure, and the people as the subjects of the ruler’s domain. In short, what is at stake in the world of ancient dreaming is power through the triad of god-ruler-ruled. Scott Noegel sums up the status of biblical dreaming, writing, “Like message dreams in Mesopotamian historical and literary works, biblical message dreams serve to legitimate the political, national, or military concerns of the dreamer, who is invariably someone of great importance” (56).

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<sup>31</sup> Zeitlin writes, “Modern psychoanalysis recognizes that what preoccupies one’s mind during the day may become part of a dream at night... Thus these people, who were strongly for resistance against the Babylonians and anticipated victory over them, dreamt at night of a Judean victory over the Babylonians. They strongly believed that dreams were acts of divination which had the power of efficacy and could foretell the future. Thus the dreamer was to deliver this message to the people. These men who delivered the message of their dreams were obliged to do so since they sincerely believed that it was a matter of instruction and prophecy. However, they were deluded by the idea that dreams were acts of divination and thus with this delusion they deceived the people. It is not that they were false prophets, but rather they followed a false perception” (5-6). This is a questionable argument in light of a comparative analysis of dreaming across the ancient world, which knew no psychological understanding of dreams.

Around 2450 B.C.E., Sumerian ruler Eannatum I of Lagash commissioned the production of a stele to record and glorify his military victory over the kingdom of Umma. Known as the “Stele of Vultures” (because of the depiction of vultures carrying off the severed heads of the defeated) and currently housed in the Louvre Museum in Paris, the fragments of this pillar contain the earliest recovered record of a dream. In the dream, which exists only in fragmentary form, Ningirsu, god of war and head patron deity of Lagash, stands by Eannatum’s head and blesses and sanctions the war against Umma. The message of the dream is clear—Eannatum’s aggression is being done in the righteous name of Ningirsu. The expansion of the power of Lagash, the stele makes clear, is in line with the will of the gods. Noegel adds to the notion that the stele is only an expansion of royal power. “However,” he writes, “we would be mistaken if we thought of it only as royal propaganda. The stele was discovered in the temple precinct and not on the border of Lagash, suggesting that the cult of Ningirsu had considerable interest in preserving the dream account. The Ningirsu priesthood probably stood to benefit as much from sanctioning the king with Ningirsu’s promise as from the campaign itself” (Noegel 46). In this early dream account, we see the interweaving of political and religious power structures, the divine will, and control of the meaning of the dream narrative.

A similar link between power and divine can be seen in the fragmentary remains of the legend of Sargon, here to even greater propagandistic effect. The Sargon legend begins with an ode to the king who preceded Sargon, Ur-Zababa. Ur-Zababa is credited with elevating the city-state of Kish to prominence. The cuneiform fragments speak of his accomplishments in grandiose terms: “to turn the house of Kic, which was like a haunted town, into a living settlement again -- its king, shepherd Ur-Zababa, rose like Utu over the house of Kic” (Sargon). It can be safely assumed that the inclusion of laudatory rhetoric about Ur-Zababa in what is otherwise a propagandistic piece composed to justify Sargon’s rule was deliberate. Ur-Zababa most likely had a loyal following in Kish and was highly respected, perhaps even feared. Certainly, he was seen as being the earthly representative of the patron gods and most likely had people strongly loyal to him among the kingdom’s priesthood as the Sargon legend gained shape in the oral traditions.

The tablets make clear that Ur-Zababa loses the favor of the gods, who, instead, promote the power of a seemingly loyal and innocent servant of the king, Sargon. The gods’ abandoning of Ur-Zababa is first communicated to Sargon in a dream:

One day, after the evening had arrived and Sargon had brought the regular deliveries to the palace, Ur-Zababa was sleeping (and dreaming) in the holy bed-chamber, his holy residence. He realized what the dream was about, but did not put into words, did not discuss it with anyone. (Sargon)

The precise content of the dream is not communicated to the reader, but the gist is obvious. King Ur-Zababa learns that he will be dethroned and killed, and that Sargon will replace him. Ancient readers or listeners to this story would know precisely what this meant: Ur-Zababa has lost the support of the gods, who are conveying this to him through the typical conduit of the dream. A righteous king would accept his fate and submit to the will of the gods. Not Ur-Zababa, he conceals the dream, which results in sickness<sup>32</sup>:

After five or ten days had passed, king Ur-Zababa ..... and became frightened in his residence. Like a lion he urinated, sprinkling his legs, and the urine contained blood and pus. He was troubled, he was afraid like a fish floundering in brackish water. (Sargon)

The king's concealment of the divine message is in vain; Sargon receives the same or a very similar message in a dream of his own:

It was then that the cupbearer of Ezina's wine-house, Sargon, lay down not to sleep, but lay down to dream. In the dream, holy Inana drowned Ur-Zababa in a river of blood. The sleeping Sargon groaned and gnawed the ground. When king Ur-Zababa heard about this groaning, he was brought into the king's holy presence, Sargon was brought into the presence of Ur-Zababa (who said:) "Cupbearer, was a dream revealed to you in the night?" Sargon answered his king: "My king, this is my dream, which I will tell you about: There was a young woman, who was as high as the heavens and as broad as the earth. She was firmly set as the base of a wall. For me, she drowned you in a great river, a river of blood." (Sargon)

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<sup>32</sup> The physical ramifications of concealing prophetic dream material can be seen across the ancient sources. Noegel provides a rich example from the site of Mari (48).

This is a startling passage. First, Sargon receives the symbolic prophecy that the gods are conspiring to kill the king, his master. Second, the king chooses to confront Sargon, despite knowing that Sargon will corroborate what he already knows—that his days are numbered. Finally, most strikingly, Sargon reveals the truth of his dream to Ur-Zababa, knowing, of course, that the sitting king will immediately see him as an enemy and try to kill him.

This is exactly what happens. Ur-Zababa plots to kill Sargon, directly controverting the divine message and setting himself up against the gods. Even worse, the king claims that the killing of Sargon is in line with what the goddess Inana's demands. From a favored and seemingly beloved king, Ur-Zababa, by refusing the truth of the dream, has turned himself into an apostate. It is Sargon who is now arrayed on the side of the gods. They have chosen to elevate him to the position of ruler, marking him for greatness. Sargon's historical greatness ultimately comes with his military victory over the hegemonic power in ancient Sumer, King Lugalzagesi of Uruk. Not surprisingly, the final part of the extent legend connects Ur-Zababa and Lugalzagesi in an attempt to murder Sargon, pairing the two monarchs in the sacrilegious attempt to defy the gods by acting against the dream prophecy. Sargon's final victory over both Ur-Zababa and Lugalzagesi, and his domination of all of Babylonia have now been fully legitimized. The sequence of dreams works rhetorically and propagandistically to transform Sargon from a lowly regicide, usurper, and tyrannical conqueror into the rightful and godly heir to the throne, and imperial master of the region (Cooper and Heimpel 74; Nigro 85).

One final example of ancient Mesopotamian dreaming will help form a context for the dream narratives in the book of Genesis. The Gudea cylinders A and B, a text called "The building of Ningirsu's temple," contain an elaborate use of dreaming (Gudea). In the text, King Gudea receives a dream. The vision is so impactful that he leaves immediately to tell it to the goddess Nanshe, his dream interpreter. Gudea's dream is one of the most vivid and rich in all of ancient Mesopotamian literature. He tells Nanshe:

In the dream there was someone who was as enormous as the heavens, who was as enormous as the earth. His head was like that of a god, his wings were like those of the Anzud bird, his lower body was like a flood storm. Lions were lying at his right and his

left. He spoke to me about building his house, but I could not understand what he exactly meant, then daylight rose for me on the horizon.

Then there was a woman -- whoever she was. She ..... sheaves. She held a stylus of refined silver in her hand, and placed it on a tablet with propitious stars, and was consulting it.

There was, furthermore, a warrior. His arm was bent, holding a lapis lazuli tablet in his hand, and he was setting down the plan of the house. The holy basket stood in front of me, the holy brick mould was ready and the fated brick was placed in the mould for me. In a fine *ildag* tree standing before me *tigidlu* birds were spending the day twittering. My master's right-side donkey stallion was pawing the ground for me. (Gudea)

Nanshe responds and explains to Gudea the meaning behind every symbolic element in the dream. The dream contains the divine command to rebuild the temple for the god Ningirsu, the E-ninnu, as well as the plans for its construction. When Gudea asks for further instructions, Ningirsu again comes to the head of the sleeper and supplies great detail about the building of the temple, a grandiose and tremendously expansive project that is sure to stretch the capacity of his domain. And this is precisely the point, the directives to build the temple come from Ningirsu, the god, the patron of the city, and not directly from the Gudea, the king. The temple, then, is to be a domicile for Ningirsu, not for Gudea. The labor and resources required to construct such an opulent palace are labor and resources expended in the service of Ningirsu, not for the earthly ruler Gudea. That is not to say that the building of the temple has nothing to do with Gudea. It is Gudea who provides the vital link between the people of his realm and the gods. It is Gudea who has the responsibility to build the temple. It is Gudea who has the favor of the gods and who can entice Ningirsu to dwell in the new temple of E-ninnu, thus elevating the status of Lagash and the power of the king. The dreams in this narrative are the key elements in the rhetorical and propagandist strategy of the account—an account that is intended to justify the massive civic effort to rebuild the E-ninnu and to solidify the power position of Gudea as the link between the people and the gods (Bewer 128). The completion of the temple with the most lavish materials and elaborate detail as well as the enticement of Ningirsu to dwell there set the stage for a sweeping expansion of Gudea's authority. The building of the temple, initiated and described in dreams, represented the cornerstone of Gudea's rule.

Gudea had built the E-ninnu, made its powers perfect. He brought butter and cream into its dairy and provided its ..... with bread (?). He had debts remitted and made all hands clear. When his master entered the house, for seven days the slave woman was allowed to become equal to her mistress and the slave was allowed to walk side by side with his master. But the ritually unclean ones could sleep only at the border of his city. He silenced the evil-speaking tongue and locked up evil.

He paid attention to the justice of Nanše and Ningirsu. He provided protection for the orphan against the rich, and provided protection for the widow against the powerful. He had the daughter become the heir in the families without a son. A day of justice dawned for him. He set his foot on the neck of evil ones and malcontents. (Gudea)

These contextual pieces provide valuable perspective on questions about Jacob's and Joseph's brothers' reaction to Joseph's youthful dreams. On the most basic level, these examples show the magnitude of the dream experience. The dream in this context is a conduit for vital communication between the divine realm and the human realm. From the three examples, it is clear that the dream message is linked to earthly power. The gods' messages can decisively shift the political or military balance on earth. Dreams are taken quite seriously by all involved. In the cases of Sargon and Gudea, the need or requirement to share the dream with others is stressed. In Sargon, the failure to tell of the dream and the keeping of the divine message secret (or within the body) is deleterious to health. Ur-Zababa keeps the dream message hidden—he suffers. Sargon reveals, despite the fact that the revelation places him in great danger. Even greater danger would come from angering the gods by keeping the dream a private matter. There is no conception of a “private” dream in the ancient Near Eastern literature. Dreams have social significance. The dreamer is required to communicate the dream. The final important lesson gleaned from these examples (and many others) is that details matter. There is nothing extraneous in ancient dream narratives.

Applied to the dreams of the youthful Joseph, these three elements (1: the dream as a channel of communication between the divine and the mundane; 2: the necessity of communicating dreams to the social/political group; 3: the significance of detail) add complexity to the interaction between Joseph and his family. The reactions to Joseph's dreams now seem

doubly curious and cannot be explained by reference to jealousy, psychology, or foolishness. After listening to Joseph, the brothers ask, “Do you mean to reign over us? Do you mean to rule over us?” When Joseph tells the dreams to his father, Jacob says, “What... is this dream you have dreamed? Are we to come, I and your mother and your brothers and bow low to you on the ground?” Since there is no precedent in the ancient literature for the brothers and Jacob to see these dreams as expressions of Joseph’s desires, longings, or personal ambitions—the two possibilities I present above seem the most likely. The first possibility is that the brothers and Jacob recognize these dreams as divine in origin, as coming from God, and yet choose to act against the divine message, even without fully understanding it.<sup>33</sup> In this reading, Jacob and the brothers are arrayed against Joseph and God. The second possibility is that Jacob and the brothers view Joseph’s dreams as false prophecies—and Joseph as a charlatan or heretic—akin to a magician or sorcerer.<sup>34</sup> In this scenario, Joseph’s dreams would be false dreams, Joseph a prophet of a false god or gods, who at the very least resembles Jeremiah’s “prophets who prophesy falsehood.” Whatever the case may be, by placing these dreams in the context of ancient Near and Middle Eastern dreaming, it becomes clear that the conflict between Joseph and his family is much deeper and more significant than previously recognized. Jacob and Joseph, far from allies, appear to represent hostile and incompatible camps.<sup>35</sup>

Evidence of a deep and serious theological-political antagonism between Jacob and Joseph can be traced throughout the story. Chapter 37:12-14 tells of Jacob sending Joseph out to meet his brothers in the fields. The previous line (37:11) sets the stage. “So his brothers were wrought up at him, and his father kept the matter in mind” (Berlin 75). The conventional

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<sup>33</sup> Both Joseph’s brothers and Jacob focus exclusively on the issue of power in reaction to Joseph’s dreams. While power is of course a large part of the dreams’ implication, it is certainly not all there is. The use of the sheaves indicates a clear reference to the issue of food, famine, and provision. The dream contains the prophecy that Joseph will provide for his family in times of need, that he will feed them. This positive element is not recognized by Jacob or the brothers. In a similar fashion, the symbolism in the dream about the sun, moon, and eleven stars bowing to Joseph is important. The celestial bodies and their arrangement around a point indicate a spatial reorientation—in other words a migration of the people to where Joseph is. This dream, thus, contains the prophecy concerning the migration of Jacob’s people to an Egypt ruled by Joseph. As such, both dreams are about power—but they are both more specific. Jacob and the brothers fail to recognize (or at least to address) the specificity and nuance of the dreams.

<sup>34</sup> The logical problems with this aspect of the narrative have been recognized since ancient times (Josephus). The solution to the problem, however, has been to change the story and to present Jacob as explicitly recognizing the divine nature of Joseph’s dreams and God’s control of history (Feldman 118).

<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, Josephus changes Jacob’s reaction entirely in his *Antiquities*. He writes, “This vision he [Joseph] recounted to his father [Jacob] in the presence of his brethren, suspecting no malice on their part, and besought him to explain what it meant. Jacob was delighted with the dream: grasping in his mind what it predicted and sagely and unerringly divining its import, he rejoiced at the great things that it betokened...” (Josephus vol. 4 175)



narrative posits that Jacob keeps the matter of the brothers' hostility in mind in order to protect Joseph. However, this makes no sense in the way it is commonly understood—for Jacob immediately and purposefully places Joseph in grave danger: "One time when his brothers had gone to pasture their father's flock at Shechem, Israel said to Joseph, 'Your brothers are pasturing at Shechem. Come, I will send you to them'" (75).<sup>36</sup> It seems more plausible that Jacob's intent is to send Joseph into grave danger in order to test whether or not Joseph is a true or a false prophet. The fact that this scene directly follows the dream sequence is not coincidental. That Jacob, in this reading, becomes a sinister version of Abraham during the attempted sacrifice of Isaac is reinforced by the parallel between Joseph's response to Jacob, "I am ready," (75) and Abraham's similar response to God when called upon to hear the divine command to sacrifice his son: "Here I am" (45, see note). Joseph's mirroring of Abraham's declaration is fascinating for many reasons. First, it transforms this seemingly ordinary scene of being sent out to the field into an event with divine implications. Second, it is the sacrificial son (the Isaac) and not the sacrificing father (the Abraham) who now seems to have the divine connection, for the "I am ready," just like Abraham's "Here I am," forms a communicative bridge between the godly and the mundane. Narratively speaking, this is the moment in the story when Joseph surpasses and supplants Jacob as the agent of history. Jacob's attempt to block this transition—to deny and contravene the message of the dreams—can be compared to Ur-Zababa's attempt to defy the wishes of the gods by having Sargon killed. The implication of Jacob in Joseph's (potential) murder acts to undermine Jacob's legitimacy and to defend Joseph's eventual usurpation of power over the people.<sup>37</sup>

As Joseph approaches his brothers in the field, they say to each other, " 'Here comes that dreamer! Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; and we can say, 'A savage beast devoured him.' We shall see what comes of his dreams'" (75). The brothers' scorn for Joseph's dreams has most commonly been explained as the result of jealousy and their hatred of Jacob's favor of Joseph.<sup>38</sup> As shown above, in the ancient context the dream is immediately a

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<sup>36</sup> Wenham purports that the thought of fratricide never occurs to Jacob and that he innocently sends Joseph to check up on his brothers and the flocks: "...neither Joseph nor Jacob thought he was in danger from the brothers" (353). The parallel language between Joseph and Abraham, however, points to a different sensibility.

<sup>37</sup> Carr is right to point to the deep tensions between the narratives and characters of Jacob and Joseph. He gestures toward Niditch's argument, which proposes that while the Joseph narrative stresses the preservation of order, the Jacob story places "greater emphasis on craftily finding one's way in an unpredictable world" (Carr 281).

<sup>38</sup> This is the basic position of Redford, who maintains that the brothers' "sudden fit of jealousy is perfectly understandable within the context of the story, and it is probably wrong to read any broader meaning into their curt

question of divine communication (either real or false). Jacob, I contend, is testing the divine status of the dreams by sending Joseph out into the fields to meet his bloodthirsty brothers. The brothers are actively rejecting Joseph's divine status—or God's will—by planning to kill him.

Jacob's reaction to the brothers' story of Joseph's death is similarly puzzling. It is Jacob, after all, who sends Joseph into danger. Jacob is well aware of the hatred Joseph's brothers have for him. And yet, when the brothers return and present Joseph's bloody tunic, Jacob seems to immediately fall for the ruse, believing that a savage beast has torn Joseph apart: "My son's tunic!" he cries, "A savage beast devoured him! Joseph was torn by a beast" (Berlin 76). On the surface, this seems strange. Why wouldn't Jacob suspect the brothers of foul play? Here, the possibility of a second, symbolic reading opens up. Jacob's "savage beast" is a metaphor for a false god, Joseph's death the result of having been seduced from the divine path. The reader senses, however, that it is Jacob who is now treading on religiously dubious ground. This moment of narrative confusion or tension points to the "untamable" nature of Genesis, a text that invites and perhaps requires speculative readings in violation of defined academic norms (West; Carr, "Untamable Text").

The consequences of the brothers' acts in the text substantiate Joseph's status as a prophet. It is not surprising that when the narrative picks up with Joseph next in Egypt, the story continues, "the Lord was with Joseph, and he was a successful man" (78). The shift from the questionable status of Joseph to the definitive status of Joseph as prophet is remarkable and important. It allows Egyptians like Potiphar to perceive Joseph's essence, despite the fact that Joseph's brothers and Jacob—the patriarch—were either blind to it or rejected it. Still, it is curious that the Lord chooses to bless Potiphar's house and that Potiphar, despite knowing that Joseph is with the Lord, believes his conniving wife over his most trusted and valuable servant, a servant who has substantially increased his wealth.

Similar questions arise during the early Egyptian part of the Joseph story. How does Joseph become so confident that he is God's mouthpiece while in prison (40:8), even though he did not seem to perceive it earlier? Why can Pharaoh recognize the importance of dreams (41:7) when Jacob fails to see it earlier in the narrative? Why would God reveal his plans to Pharaoh

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question, 'are you really going to rule over us?'" (70) It seems to me that Redford can only arrive at these conclusions if the status of dreaming is not taken into full consideration, despite his recognition of its central narrative importance (70-71). When it is, the brothers' question becomes absolutely central—it is about the nexus of power formed by the triad god—priest/patriarch—common believer.

(41:28), who is not a believer in the Hebrew God? These questions result from the imposition on the text of a distinct philosophy of history, a philosophy that asserts the Hebrew God's total control over all of human activity. Individual action, individual agency, is minimized in this Egyptian section to make room for God's turning of the divine wheel of time. It is here that the case is being built for the great historical epic of the Jewish faith—the Israelites' fall into slavery and God's liberation of them and delivery (with the newly divulged Law) to the Promised Land.

Joseph is the key figure in the first act of the Moses epic. He is God's human agent, the man who assists God in controlling the historical narrative. It is curious, though, that Joseph seems to become more and more Egyptian as God's use of him as the lever of history intensifies. Joseph, the seeming heir to the patriarchal tradition, marries an Egyptian woman, despite this being against the cultural practices of his people. Not only is Joseph's wife a non-believer, she is the daughter of Poti-phera, the priest of On. Considering the care Genesis takes in finding suitable marriages for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob from within the fold, it is striking that Joseph strays from it. To facilitate Joseph's Egyptian assimilation, Pharaoh gives him an Egyptian name: Zaphenath-paneah (*God speaks; he lives* or *creator of life*). The shift of name and marriage are downplayed in the text—but their inclusion indicates that these were parts of the story that could not be denied. The tension between this new Egyptian Joseph and the old Jacobite one is symbolized most acutely in the naming of his sons: “Joseph named the first-born Manesseh, meaning, ‘God has made me forget completely my hardship and my parental home.’ And the second he named Ephraim, meaning, ‘God has made me fertile in the land of my affliction’” (Berlin 83). The explicit naming of the sons supports the notion of a narrative confrontation between Jacob's world in Canaan and Joseph's Egyptian existence, thus symbolically pitting the two patriarchs against each other.

These worlds come into direct contact again during the famine. As we know from the conventional narrative, the brothers come to Egypt to petition Joseph, now vizier of Egypt, for food. Joseph recognizes them, while they do not recognize him. Joseph plays games with his brothers before eventually revealing his identity to them and calling for them to bring Jacob and the entire tribe to Egypt. The brothers and Jacob obey. But Jacob has doubts about the move, which set up the following dream:

So Israel set out with all that was his, and he came to Beer-sheba, where he offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac. God called to Israel in a vision by night: “Jacob, Jacob!” He answered, “Here.” And He said, “I am God, the God of your father. Fear not to go down to Egypt, for I will make you there into a great nation. I Myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I Myself will also bring you back; and Joseph’s hand shall close your eyes.” (91)

This is a striking scene for at least five reasons. First, it shifts the focus abruptly back to Jacob and his relationship to God. Second, it reminds that Jacob has a direct communicative conduit with God while Joseph’s link is indirect, that of an agent (witting or unwitting) of God’s designs and receiver/interpreter of God’s coded messages. Third, Jacob is expressing his deep unease about leaving the holy land, an unease that stands in marked contrast to Joseph’s Egyptian assimilation and transformation. Fourth, it is God who directly intervenes to unburden Jacob, blessing the move away from Canaan and into Egypt, this after stressing for so long the critical importance of residing on divine ground. Fifth, the passage is an attempt to bring Jacob and Joseph back together, to plaster over the rifts in their relationship and bring closure to the story and uniformity to the text—an attempt that eventually is brought to conclusion by Joseph’s kiss on the dead Jacob’s body, cited above.

## **Two Josephs**

The tensions in the Genesis account, I propose, point to the existence of another version of the Joseph story, one at odds with the basic philosophy of history presented in Genesis. The Genesis account acts as an elaborate attempt to undermine the stature of Jacob and to defend and enhance the position of Joseph, thus setting the stage for the Moses epic. The key to both the Joseph story and the Moses epic is the total omnipotence of God over history—that God is spinning the wheel of earthly affairs. Joseph and Moses are both agents of God. This is a radical departure from the deal-making (“trickster”) Jacob, whose power seems at times to challenge God directly, as in the nighttime wrestling scene on the bank of the Jabbok River. In the revised version of the narrative, Joseph-the-dreamer is meant to dethrone Jacob-the-dreamer. The receiver of prophecy and the interpreter of God’s will replaces the dreamer of the ladder, a potential challenger to the unidirectional power of God and the unapproachable divine realm. What could this spectral text

be that lurks below the Joseph story? To rediscover it, I experiment with peeling away the dreams, which provide the philosophy of history behind the beginnings of the Moses epic. The following counter-narrative is a speculative one.

The story begins with the rise of Joseph as a challenger to Jacob's dominance in the Canaanite camp. Jacob's removal of Joseph from the common work of the brothers is an attempt to limit his influence among the brothers; it is not a form of preference for him. Similarly, his "gift" of the multicolored or long-sleeve tunic is a move to differentiate and ostracize Joseph—perhaps a precursor to the inquisitional *sanbenito*.<sup>39</sup> Joseph responds to this (or initiates this) by taking on a faith in an opposing deity, thus challenging the underpinnings of Jacob's tribal supremacy.<sup>40</sup> What is perceived as false faith gets Joseph thrown out of camp and sold into slavery. Joseph's ambitions and skills as a challenger allow him to thrive for a time being in Potiphar's house, but these same characteristics eventually bring him into conflict with the master. Potiphar casts Joseph into prison out of fear of Joseph's rising power. Again, Joseph overcomes his circumstances. His intelligence and skill win him the favor of the Pharaoh—Joseph beats out the other potential dream interpreters. Upon entry into Pharaoh's court, Joseph enthusiastically adopts Egyptian modes and an Egyptian identity, shedding, as much as possible, his Israelite identity. Never once does he consider returning home or reaching out to his family; he is focused completely on the accumulation of power and influence. When famine strikes and the Israelites come to Egypt, Joseph seizes his opportunity to dominate them. Instead of providing for them in Canaan in fulfillment of their request, Joseph forces them to give up their connection to the holy land and relocate to Egypt, the infidel's domain.<sup>41</sup> Like all others, the Israelites in Egypt are subjected to Joseph's unscrupulous wielding of power. Joseph transforms into a tyrant, a transformation preserved in the text:

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<sup>39</sup> The *sanbenito* was a robe or piece of cloth worn by an accused heretic during the Spanish inquisition as part of a ceremony of punishment/execution or as a way to publically mark and humiliate the wearer. It is particularly interesting that both the *sanbenito* and Joseph's coat or shirt play such a prominent role in the staging of a murder or execution.

<sup>40</sup> David Biale, in his article on the potential origins of the divine name El Shaddai, points to the fluidity between Israelite or Hebrew notions of God and the surrounding religious traditions. It is quite plausible, therefore, that Joseph was attempting to redefine Israelite religiosity profoundly, causing a rupture with or among the community.

<sup>41</sup> As Thomas Mann and others have pointed out, the casting of Joseph into the "pit" becomes symbolic of his journey into Egypt, itself symbolic of a descent into the underworld.

Now there was no bread in all the world, for the famine was very severe; both the land of Egypt and the land of Canaan languished because of the famine. Joseph gathered in all the money that was to be found in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan, as payment for the rations that were being procured, and Joseph brought the money into Pharaoh's palace. And when the money gave out in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan, all the Egyptians came to Joseph and said, "Give us bread, lest we die before your very eyes; for the money is gone!" So they brought their livestock to Joseph, and Joseph gave them bread in exchange for the horses, for the stocks of sheep and cattle, and the asses; thus he provided them with bread that year in exchange for all their livestock. And when that year was ended, they came to him the next year and said to him, "We cannot hide from my lord that, with all the money and animal stocks consigned to my lord, nothing is left at my lord's disposal save our persons and our farmland. Let us not perish before your eyes, both we and our land. Take us and our land in exchange for bread, and we with our land will be serfs to Pharaoh; provide the seed, that we may live and not die, that the land may not become a waste."

So Joseph gained possession of all the farm land of Egypt for Pharaoh, every Egyptian having sold his field because the famine was too much for them; thus the land passed over to Pharaoh. And he removed the population town by town, from one end of Egypt's border to the other. Only the land of the priests did he not take over, for the priests had an allotment from Pharaoh, and they lived off the allotment which Pharaoh had made of them; therefore they did not sell their land.

Then Joseph said to the people, "Whereas I have this day acquired you and your land for Pharaoh, here is seed for you to sow the land. And when harvest comes, you shall give one-fifth to Pharaoh, and four-fifths shall be yours as seed for the fields and as food for you and those in your households, and as nourishment for your children." And they said, "You have saved our lives! We are grateful to my lord, and we shall be serfs to Pharaoh." And Joseph made it into a land law in Egypt, which is still valid, that a fifth should be Pharaoh's; only the land of the priests did not become Pharaoh's.

Thus Israel settled in the country of Egypt, in the region of Goshen; they acquired holdings in it, and were fertile and increased greatly. (94)

Despite the attempt here to cast Joseph's rule in a positive light, the implications of Joseph's actions as vizier are clear. He uses his successful preparations for the famine to dramatically increase the wealth and power of the Pharaoh (and himself) by taking control of all flocks and farmland. In addition, and shockingly, Joseph manages to trade grain for human freedom, thus reducing the population to serfdom—to agricultural laborers bound to the land of their master, the Pharaoh. The only people spared from this radical expansion of power are the Egyptian priests. It is worth remembering that Joseph has by this time married into a priestly Egyptian family. If the notion of a divine hand is rejected and Joseph's actions are seen as those of a political man, the ruthlessness is impossible to ignore. The tribe of Jacob, having been lured into Egypt, has now been stripped of wealth and property and enslaved by one of its own. Joseph-the-provider transforms in this account into Joseph-the-enslaver. Genesis preserves this anti-Joseph diatribe. While the story of Joseph-the-tyrant has been told many times, as I note above, and has been set within the context of political power, it has not been situated as representing a wholly different religious paradigm. If the Joseph story was meant to shift the underlying theology of Genesis, with what was the story of Joseph-the-tyrant meant to contrast? What alternative vision was its diatribe attacking? To speculate about this, I suggest looking at Jacob's dream of the ladder, as it is this dream that the dreams in the Joseph epic could have been meant to supersede. The reorientation of the faith had to conquer the dreamscape.

### **Dreaming Two Conceptions of Faith**

A second Jacob is also lurking in the shadows of the Genesis text. To discover him, the slanderous layer added for the text's reformation as an apologia for Joseph needs to be removed. In the shadow or spectral text, Jacob is not ignorant of the divine implications of Joseph's dreams, though he sees them as representing a false god—even if this god is the eventual God of the Moses epic. Jacob's "God" is a different God. Instead of reacting to Joseph spitefully and/or jealously, Jacob sees the danger Joseph presents. The dreams, for Jacob, indicate Joseph's desire to view himself as the agent of God, to act as a prophet—albeit a false prophet. Jacob and his brothers cast Joseph out of Canaan. But Jacob is tortured by this move. The loss of Rachel's son is a high price to pay for the maintenance of the faith. The story's readers would have recognized Jacob's banishment of Joseph as the fulfillment of the aborted sacrifice of Isaac—here justified by Joseph's apostasy. Of course, Jacob has not killed Joseph. Joseph emerges when Jacob sends

his sons down to Egypt to buy grain. When he initiates this mission, Jacob has no intention of moving his tribe to Egypt—the deal is purely transactional, money for grain. The failure of the sons to carry out a proper transaction (they return from their first trip with both grain and the money they had brought with them to pay for it) deeply disturbs Jacob. He does not want to be beholden to the Pharaoh. This is why he sends the sons with double the amount of money when they go for the next load of grain. He intends to pay for the new grain and the old, clearing his debt.

Joseph will not support the Israelites in Canaan, leaving Jacob with a stark choice: he can either reject Joseph's support and try to outlast the famine, or he can acquiesce to Joseph's demands and bring his people to Egypt. The Jacob of the shadow text fights to stand his ground, to stay in Canaan. But Joseph's brothers prevail and eventually, despite his grave reservations, Jacob abandons the holy land and brings his people into the heart of Joseph's tyranny. While the Genesis account takes on a heroic and celebratory character, the spectral text is a tragedy, perhaps even an apocalyptic account of the destruction of the Jacobites. With Jacob's demise, his faith is transfigured into that of Joseph and leads seamlessly into the Moses epic.

Dreams play the key role in transforming the anti-Joseph text into the redacted version of Genesis. This points to the political potency of dreams in the ancient imagination. The Genesis account of Joseph, harnessing the power of the dream, asserts what will become the dominant mode of Jewish faith. This turn represents the beginnings of the faith's crystallization into religious orthodoxy, despite the assertions of some critics that Joseph offers a cautionary story or a critique of monarchical power. In any case, the power of God is complete. The Lord reigns over the world, controls history, and creates moral structures. All events are God's events. Good happenings are God's rewards; misfortunes are God's punishments. Law is devised to ensure correct behavior and social order. Keepers of the law, priests and political leaders, are empowered to rule over the people in the name of God. Ritual is formed to lend cohesiveness to the religious group and to reinforce the social order. They serve to reify the structures of power, both in the era of Temple Judaism and later in the Rabbinical and post-Rabbinical periods. This is a faith based on institutional order, hierarchy, control, subordination, domination, inequality, and first and foremost the politics of knowledge. One is forced to submit to this divinely guided hierarchical structure—as Jacob submits by going down to Egypt—or be cast out as an apostate,



a heretic, even as a non-person—like Nebuchadnezzar to be “driven away from men” and to eat “grass like cattle” (Berlin 1650).

The shadow or spectral text points to an alternative conception of faith, perhaps even a primordial version of a lost religious tradition. The clearest traces of this can be found in Jacob’s dream of the ladder.<sup>42</sup>

He [Jacob] came upon a certain place and stopped there for the night, for the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of that place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. He had a dream; a stairway was set on the ground and its top reached to the sky, and angels of God were going up and down on it.

And the Lord was standing beside him and He said, “I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac: the ground on which you are lying I will assign to you and to your offspring. Your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you and your descendants. Remember, I am with you: I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”

Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, “Surely the Lord is present in this place, and I did not know it!” Shaken, he said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven.” Early in the morning, Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He named the site Bethel; but previously the name of the city had been Luz.

Jacob then made a vow, saying, “if God remains with me, if He protects me on this journey that I am making, and gives me bread to eat and clothes to wear, and if I return safe to my father’s house—the Lord shall be my God. And this stone, which I have set up as a pillar, shall be God’s abode; and of all that You give me, I will set aside a tithe for you.” (58-59)

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<sup>42</sup> David Carr agrees, asserting, “The ‘angel ladder’ and ‘gate of heaven’ themes were part of a cultic theology standing behind the older Bethel story” (313).

The implications of Jacob's dream vision of the ladder present a potentially sweeping challenge to the theology of the Joseph-Moses narrative. While Joseph-Moses represents a process of God becoming distant from his human worshippers, increasingly working through figures of mundane power, Jacob's dream of the ladder moves in the opposite direction, bringing Jacob physically close to God. In the scene, Jacob willingly gives his faith directly to God, while God pledges to take care of Jacob in return. There is no intermediary between Jacob and God. But this contract between Jacob and God itself does not evoke the full radicalism of the dream. That comes in the dream vision. The vision of the ladder reveals to Jacob a crack through which he can reach an eternally coexisting metaphysical sphere beyond the realm of the ordinary universe. This vision is the type of experience usually reserved for the inhabitants of the higher dimension. No other character in the biblical narrative before or after Jacob accesses this space in such a direct way.

The only other time humans aspired toward a material connection between heaven and earth was the tower of Babel, which was struck down precisely because it symbolized the power of a unified human community (Gen. 11.4-9). The verses about Babel in Genesis point to similar power dynamics to the ones found in the Jacob-Joseph epic. The people of Babel work together, seemingly in conditions of basic equality. Their happiness and contentment appears to be the basis of their success in raising their structure to the heavens. Moreover, the building of the structure allows humans, not God, to overcome the divide between the physical and the metaphysical zones. God's response to this communal success is to sew division, to prevent open communication, and to scatter the people, destroying the power of the community in order to make humans easier to control. The anarchic-socialistic fabric of Babel transforms into a scattering of potentially hostile and authoritarian groups.

Jacob's vision of the ladder could be seen as a reimagining of the Babel ideal. Strikingly, this vision comes to Jacob raw, unfiltered, and at a time when order is collapsing in the text. Isaac is blind. Jacob has stolen Esau's birthright and goes on the run, embarking on his journey to Laban's camp. By moving beyond or between the structures of social order and control—by fleeing into an unknown and uncontrolled space—it seems as if Jacob has opened himself up to perceiving a different vision of the faith. Only such a vision could affect as it does: “‘Shaken,’ he said, ‘How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven’” (59).

Unlike the ancient Mesopotamian examples of gods dwelling in temples and city-states within the territory of the ruler, thereby linking the divine, the priesthood, and the king, Jacob's "abode of God" is located between nodes of power—along the lines of local Canaanite shrine-building. The power and sanctity of the space of the dream, the space that hosts the ladder, should not be dismissed as purely or even primarily symbolic. This space—inside the dreamscape—contains the connection between the human realm and the divine. Seen as real (within the dreamscape), the ladder presents a bridge between the zones. God and angels descend and ascend—as, one could argue, Jacob (and others) can as well. In the context of the structures of religious authority in the ancient world and, more so, in that of the institutionalization of religion in subsequent historical phases, the notion that there is inherent unity of the human and divine realms instead of division gestures toward a non-hierarchical current of faith. In this current, Jacob, God, and the angels are coequals—with faith being a non-coercive compact instead of an imposition from on high.

Though it might seem strange to read this dream as "anarchic," I would like to suggest that it fits well within the concepts I have identified as elements of a specific anarchism of the dreamscape. First, the ladder dream creates a narrative rupture as Jacob journeys from one site of power (Isaac's camp) to another (Laban's camp). Second, it shows Jacob that God's blessing does not only flow through the patriarch (in this case Isaac) but can be grasped by him. Third, access to the divine does not proceed through any religious structure or representative—it is immediate and total. This contrasts starkly with the increasingly mediated nature of Israelite religion in the Moses epic, culminating in the giving of the Law to Moses and the replacement of God with God's "name" as the force that dwells among the people. Fourth, the experience of the divine is not filtered through any conceptual apparatus or ideological structures—it is an affective state of being. Jacob's "shaken" can be compared with Job's "terror," with Eve's eating of the fruit, with Frost's narrator witnessing the shattering of ice sheet, and with Chuang Tzu's doubt about the nature of the relationship between dream and "reality." All of these moments disrupt clear structures of order and organization, and present pathways for radical critique. Fifth, the dream shows the imagined division and rigid hierarchy between the divine and the mundane as false—connections exist even if they are narrow cracks in a seemingly hermetic reality. The anarchism of the dreamscape is precisely such a "crack," a fissure in the structure of waking reality that enables escape or passage through (as I suggest in my discussion of Kafka in Chapter

5), a destabilizing of identity (as in “After Apple-Picking”) and hierarchy (Jacob’s ladder), a disordering of creation (serpent in Eden), and an undermining of language and narrative constructs that support authoritarian ideologies (as I propose in the section on Rhys in Chapter 4).

The anarchic challenges to the religious authority of the post-Edenic and Mosaic order posed by Jacob’s dream of the ladder are mirrored by the intense efforts to pull the vision back into the religious mainstream. Genesis begins this work by trying to tie the image of the ladder to prophecy and ultimately to the same philosophy of history as in the Joseph and Moses stories. The biblical redactor’s attempt to encircle and limit the anarchic power of Jacob’s vision by providing framing, however, does not solve the problem of the anarchic potential of the episode for many religionists. For the interpreters of the text of the “ladder dream,” the *vision itself* needs to be disarmed through interpretation.

The first-century historian Josephus was one of the first to make an attempt to de-radicalize Jacob’s dream. Josephus wrote his history of the Jewish people, the *Antiquities*, while serving the Flavian emperors in Rome. While his account of Jewish history stands in a tense relationship to the development of post-Temple Judaism, it does set a number of key interpretive precedents for late antiquity and beyond. Josephus presents the dream sequence in the following manner:

Jacob then was sent by his mother to Mesopotamia to espouse the daughter of her brother Laban, Isaac consenting to the marriage in compliance with his wife’s wishes. He journeyed through Canaan and, because of his hatred of the inhabitants, disdained to seek lodging with any of them, but passed the night in the open air, resting his head on some stones which he had collected; and this was the vision which appeared to him in his sleep. He thought that he saw a ladder reaching from earth to heaven, down which were descending phantoms of a nature more august than that of mortals, and above it last of all plainly visible to him was God, who called him by name and addressed him thus: “Jacob, offspring of a good sire and of a grandsire who won renown for exceeding virtue, it would beseem thee not to repine at thy present lot, but to hope for better things; for indeed an abundant and abiding store of great blessings awaiteth thee through my succour. For it was I that led Abraham hither from Mesopotamia when he was driven out

by his kinsfolk and that brought thy father to prosperity; and no less than theirs shall be the portion that I shall bestow on thee. With courage, then, go thou on this journey too, with me for thine escort. For this marriage on which thine heart is set shall be consummated, and goodly children shall be born to thee, whose descendants shall be beyond number and shall leave their heritage to a yet greater posterity. To them do I grant dominion over this land, to them and to their children who shall fill all that the sun beholds of earth and sea. Nay, fear no danger nor be dismayed at thy multitude of toils, for it is I who am watching over all that thou shalt do both now and far more hereafter.”

That was what God foretold to Jacob; and he, overjoyed at these visions and promises, polished the stones whereon he lay when such great blessings were predicted, and made a vow to sacrifice upon them, should he, after gaining a livelihood, return unscathed, and to offer to God a tithe of all that he had acquired, should he come back in such fashion; he moreover held the spot in veneration and gave it the name of Bethel, which denotes in the Greek tongue “God's hearth-stone.”

Josephus's version of the dream vision is skeptical, simplified, and rendered in terms geared toward pleasing a Greco-Roman audience (Feldman). Posing as a skeptic of Jewish epiphany, Josephus qualifies Jacob's vision by saying that the patriarch “thought he saw a ladder” and that the figures were “phantoms,” not angels. In Josephus's account, God stands above or on top of the ladder, and though he is “visible” to Jacob he maintains a position of separation, distance, and authority, creating a hierarchical relationship between God and Jacob. Finally, Josephus rejects the disturbance and fear caused by the dream. Instead of presenting Jacob as “shaken” by the dream, Josephus asserts that he became “overjoyed.” This move from “shaken” to “overjoyed” serves to reinforce the importance of the prophecy about material good fortune and to deemphasize Jacob's vision as the focal point of the dream.

Philo of Alexandria, writing in the decades immediately before Josephus, offers an elaborate interpretation of Jacob's dream, in which he proposes various ways to understand its imagery. In his work *On Dreams*, Philo gives four interpretations of the stairway and the movement of the angels, all of which, he believes, are simultaneously true. The first interpretation is that the stairway represents the element “air,” which exists between the heaven and the earth. Souls can move up through air into the realm of spirit in order to free themselves

from the physical constraints of the material body or they can move down from the realm of spirit into the physical realm if they desire to become manifest again on earth. In the second interpretation, the stairway is a symbol of the human soul. The movement upwards represents the ability of God to elevate the human soul toward the divine realm. The downward movement represents the way that the words and representatives of God accompany human souls (out of compassion) as they fall back down to earth in order to help lift them up once more. The third interpretation Philo offers has to do with the dynamics of the believer. The believer is caught in an ongoing struggle between righteousness and sinfulness—and this struggle, something moving toward God, sometimes moving away from God, is visualized in the stairway and the movement of the beings up and down it. Only at the end of days, when God comes as judge, according to Philo, does this process stop. Those high enough on the stairway, he suggests, will be saved, those on the lower steps, destroyed. The final interpretation Philo offers has to do with more mundane matters. Human affairs, he argues, are by their very nature variable and subject to swift shifts of fortune. The ups and downs on the stairway, therefore, relate to vicissitudes in the human realm—simple people becoming powerful leaders, powerful leaders reduced to slaves, the poor becoming rich, the rich poor, and so on. The dream indicates that even these seemingly senseless results of fortune are part of the divine plan.

For Philo, the core of the dream image is not the stairway itself or the angels whirling moving over it; it is the appearance of God. Like Josephus, he emphasizes the elevated nature of God in the scene.<sup>43</sup> He writes:

But the dream also represented the archangel, namely the Lord himself, firmly planted on the ladder; for we must imagine that the living God stands above all things, like the charioteer of a chariot, or the pilot of a ship; that is, above bodies, and above souls, and above all creatures, and above the earth, and above the air, and above the heaven, and above all the powers of the outward senses, and above the invisible natures, in short, above all things whether visible or invisible; for having made the whole to depend upon

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<sup>43</sup> Philo is working from the Greek *Septuagint*, which elevates God on top of the ladder: “And Jacob went forth from the well of the oath, and departed into Charrhan. And came to a certain place and slept there, for the sun had gone down; and he took *one* of the stones of the place, and put it at his head, and lay down to sleep in that place, and dreamed, and behold a ladder fixed on the earth, whose top reached to heaven, and the angels of God ascended and descended on it. And the Lord stood upon it, and said, I am the God of thy father Abram, and the God of Isaac; fear not, the land on which thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed” (Philo 293, emphasis in text).

himself, he governs it and all the vastness of nature. But let no one who hears that he was firmly planted thus suppose that any thing at all assists God, so as to enable him to stand firmly, but let him rather consider this fact that what is here indicated is equivalent to the assertion that the firmest position, and the bulwark, and the strength, and the steadiness of everything is the immoveable God, who stamps the character of immobility on whatever he pleases; for, in consequence of his supporting and consolidating things, those which he does combine remain firm and indestructible. (Philo 325)

For Philo, the staircase's four-fold meaning supports the connection between the vision and God's message. While the vision is about the relationship between the material and divine worlds, the message reveals God's commitment to Jacob and his descendants, foremost by making a territorial promise and linking territorial sovereignty (material) with faith (divine).

This link between territorial sovereignty and faith underlies interpretations of Jacob's dream in the aggadic texts—the collected interpretations of and supplements to the non-legal stories of the Hebrew Bible. The aggadic retelling of Jacob's dream binds it tightly to the developing religious orthodoxy of rabbinical Judaism. It emphasizes the divine control of history, including the eventual messianic redemption of the Chosen People to the detriment of the seemingly all-powerful Roman Empire (Edom). It places the Temple at the heart of the religious realm, with everything that implies. It furthers the distance between God and the human, allowing only “prayer” to ascend the stairway. Prayer, ritual, devotion, subordination, and the institutional structures of the Temple (and thus the heir to the Temple tradition, the synagogue) gain primacy over the immediate and personal.

By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a sterilized version of Jacob's story arose within the world of the literate, “cultured” *Ashkenazi*. Heinrich Graetz's influential *History of the Jews* presents a portrait of Jacob and the patriarchal epoch that reflects 19<sup>th</sup> century European values. Jacob's otherworldly experiences are described merely as “wanderings” and “vicissitudes,” a description that, like Josephus's, emphasizes rationality over “superstition.” The central thrust of Graetz's narrative points toward establishing just ownership over the ancestral lands. The issue of ownership is buttressed by anachronistic ideological conceptions, using words like “culture,” “justice,” and most glaringly “intellectual advancement” (Graetz 4-6). Such a view has no place

for the anarchic potential of Jacob's dream of the ladder—and no such dream appears in Graetz's account. The entire scene has been erased from his Jewish history.

The closest approaches to the anarchic potential of the original dream can be found in the treatment of the dream-state in the mystical traditions. Eitan Fishbane presents a particular interesting case in his work on the medieval Kabbalist Isaac ben Samuel of Akko. Fishbane focuses on Isaac of Akko's presentation of the cyclical process of moving between the dreaming and the waking states. It is this liminal, transitional, transitory state of being asleep but not asleep (*nim ve-lo nim*) that proves fertile for the mystic's creative imagination:

*Nim ve-lo nim* is construed to be a time of insight and hermeneutic discovery—a state in which the mind becomes capable of heightened understanding by virtue of its position between the ordinary planes of consciousness . . . . Isaac of Akko drew a direct line of correlation—even causation—between the experience of rising from sleep consciousness and the hermeneutic act of “seeing the secret.” (Fishbane 105-110)

For Isaac of Akko, passing through the state of “asleep but not asleep” results in a similar type of intensity of insight as Jacob experiences when he leaves the dream of the stairway and finds himself “shaken.”

### **Ladder and Night Wrestling: A Conclusion**

The politics of the dreamscape is central to the unfolding of the Jacob-Joseph epic in Genesis. Joseph's youthful dreams and his ability to interpret dreams on God's behalf while in Egypt provide the philosophy of history for a mature Israelite faith that sets the stage for the Moses epic and the legal and political structures that emerge. The dreams provide the Joseph “novella” with its narrative cohesiveness. The dream Jacob has as he travels to Egypt contributes to this cohesion, supporting the main narrative and thematic thrusts of the story: God's control over the dynamics of history, exile as prelude to the return, hardships as tests of faith, etc. Jacob's dream on the road to Egypt has the additional consequence of lessening or surmounting the tensions between Jacob and Joseph, harmonizing the story of patriarchal lineage, which is then sealed with Joseph's deathbed kiss of his deceased father.



Jacob's dream of the ladder provides a striking contrast to the series of dreams in the Joseph novella. While God's speech to Jacob and their negotiation of faith fit into the mold of the basic covenants throughout Genesis, Jacob's dream vision of the ladder stands apart from all other dreams in Genesis—its meaning obscure. This obscurity of meaning continues to haunt the scholarly literature on Jacob's ladder dream, and from Philo and Josephus until today, there is no consensus about its meaning. There is no clarity about why this dream vision would be paired with God's subsequent speech and the agreement God and Jacob reach. This chapter proposes that the dream vision reflects a different variant of faith, one that stands in deep tension with the type of faith that is developed through the dream structure in the Joseph novella, and that illuminates the traces of conflict that remain in Genesis between Jacob and Joseph. I have characterized the type of faith evoked by Jacob's dream of the ladder as anarchic as opposed to the authoritarian model of faith that emerges through Joseph's dream-texts. This anarchism combines a number of elements that set it in opposition to the priestly and monarchical structures that govern the Joseph-Moses story and eventually come to dominate ancient and modern Judaism. These anarchist elements include, first, a dislocated notion of holy space, represented by Jacob having this vision between sites of power (Isaac's settlement and Laban's camp). Jacob's vision itself reveals the inherent unity of the physical and metaphysical realms as well as their connectedness. The ladder enables movement between these seemingly discrete zones. Second, the structure of the ladder recalls the construction of the tower of Babel, a representation of human cooperation and harmony, an anarchist-socialist ideal that is eventually crushed by the authoritarian deity. Jacob's ladder, then, reveals the persistent presence of this sensibility. Third, Jacob's dream provokes an affective response, opening Jacob up to the knowledge of divine presence and the interconnectedness of the human or physical and the divine or metaphysical. This "shaking" of Jacob, the awe or fear that it engenders, destabilizes the self and opens him up to new knowledge. Finally, the emergence of the dreamscape disrupts the narrative flow of Jacob's story, acting as a pause or an interruption of the story, fracturing the patriarchal biography. When God finally arrives in the dreamscape, he confronts not a subordinate but an equal—setting the stage for the peculiar negotiation in which Jacob seems to play an equal, if not a stronger, hand.

If one reading of Jacob's dream of the ladder is that the text posits equality with God as well as a growing tension or confrontation between this anarchic potentiality and a divine force

set on limiting and subordinating humankind, a similar approach might help open up one of the most confounding passages in Genesis: Jacob's nighttime wrestling match with a strange being on the bank of the Jabbok River as he returns to Canaan from Laban's camp. While the text can be read as presenting a direct confrontation between Jacob and a physical manifestation of God, subsequent interpretations of this scene have tried to remove God and replace him with lesser beings—either angels, humans, or even Jacob's own internal imaginings. It seems likely to me that the original intent of the text was to present a struggle between Jacob and God. Jacob takes on God's seeming omnipotence directly, as God comes to earth as an attacker—a tyrannical force attempting to win Jacob's submission. Jacob defeats God by fighting him to a draw and threatening to expose God to the light of day—thus humiliating him and destroying his power forever. The scene in Genesis ends with God's escape and his renaming of Jacob as Israel. This is no conclusive end—and fails to deal with the implications of God's defeat. The narrative cuts off. Night is over. Day arrives. Esau appears on the horizon.