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“Israel” in the Joseph Story (Genesis 37–50)

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of Ancient Israel
in Honor of
Israel Finkelstein*

edited by

ODED LIPSCHITS, YUVAL GADOT, and MATTHEW J. ADAMS

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“Israel” in the Joseph Story (Genesis 37–50)

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1. “Israel” as Israel and Judah

The historical perception and interpretation of what the term “Israel” denotes in the Hebrew Bible has changed dramatically in the past four decades. Up to the last third of the 20th century, there was a widespread consensus that “Israel” in the sense of an ethnic, political, and religious unity of the twelve tribes was a historical entity predating the states of Israel and Judah that began with Saul, David, and Solomon.¹ The reason for this scholarly consensus was the tremendous success of Martin Noth’s theory of an “amphictyony” of the Israel tribes that characterized Israel before its period of statehood.² As ingenuous as this theory was, it had several serious flaws and since then has been abandoned, and rightly so. The religious historical analogies for an “amphictyony” Noth had adduced were historically and geographically too distant from Israel in the Late Bronze age: There was no central sanctuary around which the tribes could have settled (Noth thought of the ark of the covenant as a movable central sanctuary), and the historical evaluation of the texts mentioning the twelve tribes has changed significantly.³ Apparently, they do not belong to the oldest material in the Pentateuch.

In recent research, the term “Israel,” especially in its broad application to the north and the south, has often been explained as a corollary of the downfall of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE, which apparently was economically, politically, and militarily more powerful than the southern kingdom of Judah.⁴ Israel was located in the area of major crossroads of the Levant, whereas Judah was more secluded.

It seems that the more prestigious term “Israel” was adopted by Judah at some time in the late 8th or 7th century BCE., maybe even in reversal of an earlier “pan-Israelite” ideology that had been developed under Jeroboam II, as Finkelstein suggests. As a result, Judah was included in and could qualify as “Israel.”⁵ This can be illustrated by some remarkable interpretations in the book of Isaiah.⁶ Isa 1:3, a post-722, maybe even a post-587 text, reads: *יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא יָדַע עַמִּי לֹא הִתְבוּנָן* “Israel does not know, my people does not understand.” “Israel” here clearly includes Judah and Je-

1. See, e.g., Zobel 1982.

2. Noth 1930, 1950; cf. Bächli 1977.

3. See, e.g., Levin 2003b; see also Macchi 1999; Schöpflin 2003.

4. Finkelstein 2013.

5. Cf. Kratz 2000b, 2006, 2012; Na’aman 2009; Fleming 2012; Schütte 2012.

6. See, e.g., Kratz 2006.

rusalem, as the parallel mention of “my people” indicates: Isaiah is prophesying to Judah and Jerusalem. Another example can be found in Isa 5, the so-called “song of the vineyard,” which develops a progressive fusion of “Israel” and “Judah” within the narrative and apparently reflects the downfall of the Northern Kingdom. According to Isa 5:3, the “song of the vineyard” is directed to the *יושב ירושלם ואיש יהודה* “inhabitant[s] of Jerusalem and people of Judah,” but the verse that interprets the song declares: *כי כרם יהוה צבאות בית ישראל ואיש יהודה נטע שעשועיו* “For the vineyard of YHwh Zebaoth is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting” (Isa 5:7). In this scenario, Israel and Judah do not appear as equal entities; Judah is a part of Israel which, in Isa 5:7, comprises Israel *and* Judah.

This position of a gradual process of including Judah into “Israel,” which probably took place mostly in the late 8th and during the 7th century BCE, has won remarkable support in recent research and can even claim to represent the mainstream opinion of scholars. However, Kristin Weingart has challenged this view in a voluminous monograph on the subject.⁷ Weingart reckons with a pre-722 BCE notion of a “greater” Israel comprising all twelve tribes. Her argumentation, however, is based on somewhat idiosyncratic datings of the relevant texts she discusses. Therefore, it cannot serve as a basis for the following considerations.

2. *Jacob as “Israel” in the Book of Genesis*

In the book of Genesis, the “Israel” terminology is well anchored for all twelve tribes, including Judah and Benjamin. Responsible for this notion is—besides the birth stories of Jacob’s sons in Gen 29–31—the remark in Gen 32:28–29. Here, the patriarch Jacob, the father of the twelve tribes of Israel, is being renamed as “Israel.” Usually, Gen 32:29 has been attributed to the pre-Priestly strands of the Jacob story.⁸ However, Wöhrle has recently argued that this passage presupposes the parallel statement in Gen 35:10, which in itself is an addition to the Priestly passage Gen 35:9–13. Gen 32:29 seems to be modeled according to Gen 35:10 and its Priestly forerunner, Gen 17:5, 15, the renaming of Abram and Sarai to Abraham and Sarah. Gen 32:29 thus might be a post-Priestly element within the Jabbok story in Gen 32.⁹ If this is correct, then the official renaming of Jacob to “Israel” does not belong to the earlier strata of the Jacob cycle.

The name “Israel” is used for Jacob most prominently in the Joseph story (Gen 37–50), which once was a self-standing literary unit before it was first attached to Gen 12–36 and then expanded into a bridge to the Exodus story.¹⁰ There are 33 instances of “Israel” in Gen 37–50 (37:3, 13; 42:5; 43:6, 8, 11; 45:21, 28; 46:1, 2, 5, 8, 29, 30; 47:27, 29, 31; 48:2, 8, 10, 11, 13[bis], 14, 20, 21; 49:2, 7, 16, 24, 28; 50:2,

7. See Weingart 2014; see the review by Willi-Plein 2016.

8. On the composition of the Jacob cycle, see Blum 1984, 2012a; de Pury 2010.

9. Wöhrle 2012: 88–90, 106–7. The Priestly document seems to continue employing the name “Jacob” after Gen 35, at least in the passages that are usually attributed to P: Gen 37:1, 2; 46:6; 47:7–10, 28. However, the presence of P in Gen 37–50 is a disputed issue in scholarship. See on this Lux 2000, Römer 2015: 200–201.

10. Schmid 2002; differently Kratz 2000b: 261–67. For the question of how to date the Joseph story, see below, §4, pp. 359–61.

25). "Jacob" is named 40 times (37:1, 2, 34; 42:1[bis], 4, 29, 36; 45:25, 27; 46:2[bis], 5[bis], 6, 8[bis], 15, 18, 19, 22, 25, 26[bis], 27; 47:7[bis], 8, 9, 10, 28[bis]; 48:2, 3; 49:1, 2, 7, 24, 33; 50:24), 7 of them belonging to P or its expansions (37:1, 2; 46:6; 47:7–10, 28).

As long as the assignment of the text of Gen 37–50 primarily to J and E (a few scattered verses were assigned to P) was in vogue, scholars tried to employ the use of "Jacob" versus "Israel" as a criterion for distinguishing the alleged two main sources in the Joseph story (J and E),¹¹ however unsuccessfully so.¹² Particularly since the influential study of Herbert Donner,¹³ the project of source criticism within the Joseph story has been abandoned and, instead, it has been perceived as a largely unified novella. To be sure, there are some literary expansions at several places of the narrative (e.g., the Ruben passages, the insertion of the "Midianites" in Gen 37, the Judah and Tamar episode in Gen 38, the material in Gen 47–49, and probably also the story of Potifar's wife in Gen 39),¹⁴ but the bulk of the story does not go back to the conflation of two (or even three) originally stand-alone parallel versions of it. However, for proponents of a mainly literary unified interpretation of the Joseph story, the change between "Israel" and "Jacob" has remained unexplained as well.¹⁵

"Israel" and "Jacob" occur both in the core material of the story (but also in expansions of it—e.g., in Gen 48). Unless one is content with the explanation that the author used the two names *promiscue*—and even this would require a rationale—there must be a reason for this dual use in reference to Jacob. It is fair to assume that the use of "Israel" in Gen 37–50 has political connotations, because the term is political in nature, even if applied to an individual in the narrative—that is, Jacob. Nevertheless, it is impossible to decipher the individual traits and figures in the Joseph story as an allegory of corresponding political events and entities. The Joseph story develops a textual world all its own, which is, however, not disconnected to the political realities of its authors.¹⁶ Looking at the plot of the Joseph story, it seems reasonable to assume that it argues for a specific concept of "Israel," particularly when looking back from the novella's end and climax in Gen 50: the twelve brothers find a unity among themselves after their father's death.¹⁷ Or, in more explicit political terms: "Israel" is being founded on the will of the tribes alone, abroad, in Egypt, under God's implicit rule (cf. Gen 50:19: "Am I in the place of God?"),¹⁸ without an evident base of identity.

Of course, throughout the narrative of Gen 37–50, Joseph and Benjamin play specific roles,¹⁹ but it is very difficult to say whether these roles are transparently

11. Gunkel 1901: 401.

12. See also the methodological considerations of Blum 1984: 233, 242; Weingart 2014: 264.

13. Donner 1976.

14. See Römer 2015: 187–88.

15. See Donner 1976: 39: "Die Gründe für den Wechsel sind nicht zu durchschauen"; Westermann 1982: 27.

16. See Weingart 2014: 255–58 and her discussion of Levin 2004 (Weingart 2014: 265–66).

17. See Fischer 2001; Schmid 2002: 112–17; Römer 2015: 195 n. 60.

18. See Schmid 2016.

19. See Levin 2004; Blum 2012b; Weingart 2014: 265–66.

connected to actual political situations of the author's own time or whether they retain memories, maybe even quite distant memories, of earlier such situations.

Why is this usage of "Israel" so prominent in the Joseph story, and how could this be evaluated in terms of a historical interpretation of Gen 37–50?

3. "Israel" in the Joseph Story

I will limit my discussion of the use of "Israel" and "Jacob" in the Joseph story to the instances in the core narrative—that is, without the material usually assigned to P or its expansions (Gen 37:1, 2; 46:6; 47:7–10, 28), without the redactional link to the patriarchal narrative in Gen 46:1–5, without the elaborations in Gen 48, without Gen 49, and without the portion in Gen 50:24–25 that belongs in the context of the formation of the Pentateuch and the Hexateuch. There are, however, a few text-critical issues in these passages that need to be addressed briefly: LXX has "Jacob" for Israel in 37:3 (assimilating to 37:1–2). In 42:1, LXX leaves out the second mention of "Jacob"; in 42:4, the only mention of "Jacob" as well (in both verses, LXX facilitates the style, as the subject is clear). In 45:28, "Israel" is lacking in the Vulgate and the Peshitta.²⁰ Among the Dead Sea Scrolls, only "Israel" in Gen 43:8 is attested.²¹ All these variants are clearly secondary to the Masoretic text, which thus provides an apt textual basis for the following considerations.

As Gen 48:2 (which does not belong to the literary core of Gen 37–50) shows,²² redactional additions to the Joseph story seem to be able to use "Jacob" and "Israel" interchangeably: ויגד ליעקב ויאמר הנה בנך יוסף בא אליך ויתחזק ישראל וישב על-המטה: "And Jacob was told, 'Your son Joseph has come to you.' And Israel summoned his strength and sat up in bed." For these expansions of the Joseph story, the juxtaposition of "Israel" and "Jacob" had already become a habit and could easily be reproduced.

But in the literary core of the Joseph story, the usage of "Israel" versus "Jacob" seems to be deliberately chosen. "Israel" is introduced in Gen 37:3, 13 as the father of his sons, whereas "Jacob" is first mentioned in Gen 37:34 as the father mourning over Joseph, his allegedly dead son. Due to the change of perspective from Canaan to Egypt and the exclusive focus on Joseph's fate in Egypt, neither "Jacob" nor "Israel" occur until the end of Gen 41. Gen 42:1 ties in with Gen 37:34 and speaks of "Jacob," who learns that there is grain in Egypt during the famine. Gen 42:4 then is an excellent example of how diligently the Joseph story uses its formulations with regard to Jacob's family: ואת-בנימין אחי יוסף לא-שלח יעקב את-אחיו כי אמר פן-יקראנו אסון: "But Jacob did not send Benjamin, *Joseph's brother, with his brothers*, for he feared that harm might come to him." This is the first mention of Benjamin in Gen 37–50 at all. He is introduced as "Joseph's brother," and Jacob is unwilling to send him with "his brothers": Gen 42:4 thus differentiates between Benjamin as brother of Joseph (due to their common mother Rachel), and Benjamin as brother of the other sons of Jacob (due to their common father Jacob).

20. See the discussion in Tal 2015.

21. 4QGen^c; see Ulrich 2010: 37.

22. Also attested in 4QGen^f; see Ulrich 2010: 39.

Gen 42:5 mentions “Israel’s sons” who traveled from Canaan to Egypt. When they returned without Simeon, they came home to “Jacob” (42:29), and it is “Jacob” who laments in Gen 42:36 over Joseph, Simeon, and Benjamin, who are already lost or about to be lost. “Israel” is complaining in Gen 43:6 that the brothers have told Joseph that there is yet another brother back in Canaan, Judah addresses his father “Israel” in Gen 43:8 and urges him to let Benjamin go with him to Egypt so that Israel’s family may live, and it is “Israel” who gives in (Gen 43:11).

It is the sons of “Israel” who send to him once Joseph has revealed himself to them (Gen 45:21), the brothers come to “Jacob” in Canaan (Gen 45:25), and the spirit of their father “Jacob” revives (Gen 45:27). Then, “Israel” decides to travel to Egypt to see his son Joseph before he dies (Gen 45:28). Finally, “Israel” can die in peace (Gen 47:29–31) and “Israel” is embalmed in Egypt after he passes away (Gen 50:2).

Is there a semantic logic that can be detected behind these different usages of “Israel” and “Jacob” in the literary core of the Joseph story? To my mind, Ebach is correct when he writes: “[A]ls Grundkriterium legt sich nahe, dass der Israel-Name v.a. dann gebraucht ist, wenn es um das Ganze der Familie und des [zukünftigen] Volkes geht.”²³ The name “Israel” seems to be employed when the whole family, including all brothers or its future as a living people are in view. This criterion fits all the instances of “Israel” in the core texts of Gen 37–50, even the reviving of “Jacob’s” spirit in Gen 45:27, which is immediately followed by “Israel’s” decision to see his son Joseph.

Thus, the Joseph story seems to establish “Israel” programmatically as an entity including northern and southern tribes, homeland and diaspora, not under royal but rather theocratic rule. The founding principle of this entity is its ancestor “Israel” as presented in the Joseph story. If Gen 32:29 is a late—that is, post-Priestly—insertion, as discussed above,²⁴ then this terminological stance would be an innovation of the Joseph story. I will immediately return to this point after the next section, discussing briefly the issue of dating Gen 37–50.

4. The Historical Location of the Joseph Story

How can these findings be correlated to a historical interpretation of the Joseph story? The dating of its literary core is disputed, as is the case with almost all biblical texts.²⁵ Unless one is willing to derive the motif of an Israelite man rising in a foreign court to the Sinuhe narrative²⁶ and thus also allowing dates before there even was an Israelite or Judean diaspora,²⁷ it is more compelling to interpret the Joseph story as a diaspora novella that cannot predate the fall of Samaria in 722 BCE and the subsequent establishment of a diaspora community that also found its way

23. Ebach 2007: 59.

24. See above, n. 9.

25. See the discussion of Schmid 2002: 106–12; Weingart 2014: 255–66, especially 262 n. 460–62; Römer 2015: 189–95; for earlier scholarship, Paap 1995.

26. See the bibliography in Römer 2015: 193 n. 46.

27. Weingart 2014; for parallels between the Sinuhe story and the Joseph story, see von Rabenau 1997: 47–48. Von Rabenau opts for a Solomonic dating of the Joseph story (p. 38).

into Egypt.²⁸ The year 722 BCE seems therefore to be a rather safe *terminus a quo*, maybe—given the narrative motif that Joseph’s brother follow him into exile—also 587 BCE. Furthermore, the fact that the Joseph story does not aim at legitimating a kingdom either in Israel or in Judah decidedly speaks for a post-monarchic setting.²⁹

In addition, the Joseph story seems to presuppose some prominent elements of the Deuteronomistic History:³⁰ Joseph is pictured as a precursor to David, being “handsome,” and to Solomon, being “wise,”³¹ but unlike the core convictions of the Deuteronomistic History, the Joseph story argues for the possibility and legitimacy of a good life abroad, including marrying foreign women.³² These connections would also strengthen a post 587-BCE date.

A *terminus ante quem* for the Joseph story is more difficult to establish. One can mention, first of all, Ps 105 and Jer 31:15–16, where clear allusions to it are made.³³ Ps 105 seems to presuppose the finished Pentateuch and is probably not earlier than the late 4th century BCE. Jer 31:15 might be an exilic text.³⁴ Whether or not the Joseph story is earlier than P is difficult to determine:³⁵ on the one hand, P neither has nor presupposes a Joseph story; on the other, being silent about an already existing Joseph story would fit quite well into P’s ideological concept: P’s worldview is centered around the sanctuary, so a specific emphasis on the possibility of living abroad—while this is nothing P would think negatively about—is not needed in P. However, P would have some reservations regarding Israelites marrying foreign people: for P, intermarriage is only allowed within the Abrahamite peoples (Israelites, Judeans, Edomites, Ishmaelites).³⁶ On the other hand, it is difficult to imagine that the Joseph story would have been shaped the way it is if there were already a clear link between the ancestral and the Exodus stories as established by P. As has often been noticed, the Joseph story does not really provide a smooth transition to the subsequent Exodus narrative: whereas Pharaoh in Gen 37–50 is a wise man and quite friendly to the Israelites, he is pictured as a tyrant in Exod 1–15, a king who plans and perpetrates a genocide among its children. In addition, the Israelites in Gen 37–50 are presented as nomads and shepherds, whereas in Exod 1–15 they are imagined more like prisoners of war. Therefore, Exod 1:6–8 has to “undo” the Joseph story in order that the Exodus account can be told.³⁷ This supports the assumption that the Joseph story was not conceived as a bridge from Genesis to Exodus from its very literary beginnings but rather was first added to Gen 12–36,

28. See, e.g., Römer 2000; Römer 2015: 195 n. 59 (with reference to van der Toorn 1992); Ebach 2007: 693; for the Egyptian diaspora, see Knauf 2002; Granerød 2016.

29. The motif of Joseph being a king only occurs in Gen 37:8, but only as what his brothers fear. It is most noteworthy that Joseph never becomes king, neither in Israel nor in Egypt; see further §5 below.

30. I refrain from discussing the problems of this hypothesis; see Römer 2007.

31. Cf. Gen 39:2, 6, 21; 1 Sam 16:12, 18; 18:14, 28; Gen 37:3, 23, 32; 2 Sam 13:18–19; Gen 41:33, 39; 1 Kgs 3:12; see on this Schmid 2002: 113 n. 140.

32. Schmid 2002: 114; Römer 2015: 194.

33. See the detailed discussion in Schmid 2002: 110 nn. 130–33.

34. Schmid 1996: 133–35.

35. See the discussion in Römer 2015: 196–201.

36. See de Pury 2000: 55.

37. See Schmid 2010: 50–55.

although not as a "Fortschreibung."³⁸ It might have been inserted into the narrative flow of Genesis to Exodus only after P,³⁹ but this would not preclude a literary origin of the novella as a unit unto itself contemporary to or even earlier than P.

5. *Jacob as "Israel": An Invention of the Joseph Story?*

In the narrative flow of the ancestral stories in their present shape, Jacob is introduced as "Israel" in Gen 32:29. If Gen 32:29 is modeled on the renaming scene in Gen 35:10, which in itself is an addition to P,⁴⁰ then the identification of Jacob and "Israel"—in diachronic terms—was first introduced by the opening of the Joseph story in Gen 37:3.⁴¹ In other words, the literary and historical origins of the notion of Jacob being "Israel" in the book of Genesis are to be found in the Joseph story. The reason why the Joseph story developed and pursued this option lies in its ideological concept: if one argues—to my mind correctly—for an original extension of the Joseph story up to Gen 50,⁴² the political focus of the story seems to be establishing a conceptual unity of Israel as a people of twelve tribes that is based on mutual solidarity among the tribes, especially Joseph and Benjamin on the one hand and Judah on the other. In addition, the Joseph story argues for the possibility of a good life abroad—that is, in the diaspora—it has no objections against mixed marriages (Joseph marries Aseneth), and it seems to advance a theocratic ideal. In Gen 37:8, Joseph's brothers fear that he might "be king" (המלך תמלך עלינו) over them,⁴³ but Joseph never becomes king in Israel. Rather, he rhetorically states in Gen 50:19: התחת אלהים אני "Am I in the place of God?" thus pointing away from himself to God as a suzerain figure. Apparently, the figure of Joseph changes during the narrative of Gen 37–50, from a spoiled, presumptuous youngster to a responsible leader.⁴⁴

It seems that there was a certain need for the Joseph story to stress that "Israel" in exile—be it the northern or the Judean diaspora, be it the diaspora in Mesopotamia or in Egypt—is "Israel." Jacob's preference for Joseph (over against Judah) highlights the position that the north—which apparently had vanished—is still of vital significance for the south even after 587 BCE.

Vice versa, one might speculate whether the notion of Jacob as being the father of twelve sons (and not only of ten sons) in Gen 29–31, 35 is the result of a reworking of Gen 29–31 in light of the Joseph story.⁴⁵ But this would be the subject of another study.

38. See above, n. 10.

39. Wöhrle 2012; Römer 2015.

40. See again n. 9.

41. "Israel" in Gen 34:7 occurs in a post-P narrative (Levin 2003a), Gen 35:21 is dependent upon Gen 35:10 and also post-P. Ede (2016: 513) holds the very narrow view that Gen 37:3 is only understandable if the reader already knows Gen 32:29.

42. See Schmid 2002: 114–17; differently, Kratz 2011: 52 n. 67; see also the discussion in Gertz 2016: 279–85.

43. See Blum 1984: 241; Weingart 2014: 262–64.

44. Schmid 2016.

45. On the composition of Gen 29–31, see the very different positions of Levin 1993: 221–31; 2003b: 117–19; Kratz 2000b: 270–71; as opposed to Blum 2012a; Weingart 2014: 236–44; see also Fleming 2012: 77–81.

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