

Joseph Between Potiphar and His Wife

The Biblical Text in the Light of a Comparative Study on Early Jewish Exegesis

Isaac Kalimi - Jerusalem

I. Introduction

The incident about Joseph and Potiphar's wife (Gen 39)¹ comprises an essential place in some Pseudepigraphical writings. In *The Testament of Joseph* (second century BCE), for example, it is almost the only topic discussed.² The theme takes an important position also on the midrashic books of the Torah such as Genesis Rabbah, Midrash Tanchuma (Buber as well as Jelamdenu recensions).³ The current chapter concentrates particularly on passages devoted to this issue in Midrash Psalms *Shocheh-Tov* comparing them with the early Jewish exegesis. The purpose is to achieve better understanding of Biblical interpretation through the generations in post-Biblical and rabbinical sources concerning this and related episodes.

II. Did Joseph Touch Potiphar's Wife?

The ambivalent verse in Gen 39,11: "One day, when he came into the house *to do his work*, and there was not a man of the household there inside", was interpreted in the Babylonian Talmud, *Sotah* 36b as following:

¹Like many other Biblical figures (female and male), the author did not reveal her personal name(s), compare, i.e., "Lot's wife" (Gen 19,26); "Manoah's wife" (Jud 13,3.6.9 etc.), "Pharaoh's daughter" (Ex 2,5.7.8.10); "Ethiopian woman" (Num 12,1), "the wise woman of Tekoa" (2 Sam 14,2.4.8.9 etc.), "a wise woman" of Abel Beth-Maacah (2 Sam 20,16.17.21.22), "one who had escaped" (Gen 14,13; cf. 1 Sam 4,12-17), "a man who gathered sticks" (Num 15,32-36), "a man came from Saul's camp" (2 Sam 1,2). Even some Pseudepigraphical writers, Josephus and the Talmudic Sages, who usually invented names for anonymous Biblical figures (see I. Kalimi, *Zur Geschichtsschreibung des Chronisten: Literarisch-historiographische Abweichungen der Chronik von ihren Paralleltexen in den Samuel- und Königsbüchern* [BZAW 226; Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1995], pp. 70-72; idem, *The Book of Chronicles: Historical Writing and Literary Devices* [The Biblical Encyclopaedia Library XVIII; Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2000], pp. 77-80 [Hebrew]), did not invent a name for her (see, e.g., *AJ* 2,41ff.). Presumably, they were of the opinion that such a wicked woman (who was described negatively, a just antitype to Tamar and Ruth, see Genesis Rabbah 87,4), deserved to stay anonymous forever!

²See H.C. Kee, *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, in J.H. Charlesworth [ed.], *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* [London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1983], vol. 1, pp. 819-825; cf. J.L. Kugel, *In Potiphar's House - The Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts* (San Francisco: Harper, 1990), pp. 23-24.

³For the main features of Joseph's figure in these texts, see, for example, Kugel, *In Potiphar's House*, pp. 11-155; M. Niehoff, *The Figure of Joseph in Post-Biblical Jewish Literature* (Leiden / New York / Köln: E.J. Brill, 1992), pp. 111-141 (the figure of Joseph in Genesis Rabbah); see also pp. 146-164 on Joseph's figure in the Targumim (= idem, "The Figure of Joseph in Targums", *JJS* 39 [1988], pp. 234-250).

“Rab and Samuel [first generation of the Babylonian Amoraim]: One said that it really means *to do his work*; but the other said that he went *to satisfy his desires*”.⁴

According to the latter opinion (as usual in these cases it is hard to say who said what) Joseph actually went in to lie with Potiphar’s wife, but at the last minute something happened there, something that prevented him from sinning (Gen 39,12). But what happened exactly? In Genesis Rabbah 87,11, Rabbi Samuel bar Nachman (second and third generations of the Palestinian Amoraim) explained “*And there was not a man* - on examination he [= Joseph] did not find himself a man”, that is, he found himself impotent, and could not perform the sexual act.⁵ Rab Huna (fourth generation of the Palestinian Amoraim) in Rabbi Mattena’s name, explained that - miraculously - “his *father’s* image appeared in front of him, at which his blood cooled”.⁶ The parallel version of this view in Babylonian Talmud, *Sotah* 36b stresses that “his *mother’s* image appeared in front of him”.⁷ There is also a third version of the tradition in Jerusalem Talmud, *Horayoth* 2,5 that states Joseph saw both, his *father’s* and his *mother’s* images.

One can define Rab Huna’s explanation either as a kind of psychological interpretation for Joseph’s last minute avoidance of sin, or as a peaceful divine interference that caused him to stay away from the married woman. However, among the rabbinic sources there is also another description, an aggressive and frightening divine intervention, which has been preserved in a late aggadic midrash, called *Avkir*, which is cited in Yalkut Simeoni 145:

“Rabbi [= Rabbi Judah, died 219 CE] said, he [= Joseph] wanted but...; At the second time the Holy One, blessed be He, took a huge rock and said: ‘If you [= Joseph] will touch her I will throw the rock and destroy the whole world!’”

According to this tradition, Joseph had actually no other choice but not to touch his master’s wife. By the exceptional power of the Almighty he was forced to stay away from her. This rabbinic view disagrees greatly with the concept of “free choice” which explicitly gives everyone the right to act as he wishes, due to his own will and decision (Deut 30,15). Moreover, from first glance, the Biblical Joseph story could be considered as a typically ‘secular’ narrative. The story’s beginning, middle and end, are each quite naturally a continuation of the other. Altogether they form a coherently unique piece of quality prose. There is no divine interference, no miracles, angels or demonic activity.⁸ To cite Claus Westermann, “Es gibt wohl keinen Teil der Bibel, der so menschlich von Gott redet wie die Joseph-Erzählung. ...was hier in einem kleinen Menschenkreis geschieht, das ist uns alles

⁴Compare with the parallel version in Tanchuma (Jelamdenu), Parashat Wayyesheb, 9.

⁵See also Jerusalem Talmud, *Horayoth* 2,5 (46d); Targum Pseudo-Jonathan on Gen 49,24. There is also another opinion, stated by Rabbi Isaac: “His seed was scattered and issued through his fingernails”.

⁶See Ch. Albeck, *Bereschit Rabba mit kritischem Apparat und Kommentar* (Veröffentlichungen der Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums; Jerusalem: Wahrman Books, 1965), pp. 1071-1073. For the English translation cf. H. Freedman - M. Simon, *The Midrash Rabbah - Volume One: Genesis* (London / Jerusalem / New York: Soncino Press, 1977), pp. 811-812 (here it appears under section 87,7).

⁷Compare Tanchuma (Jelamdenu), Parashat Wayyesheb, 9; Yalkut Shimeoni, 146.

⁸In the entire story only once God appeared in a short night vision and encouraged Jacob, “Fear not to go down into Egypt...” (Gen 46,2-4).

vertraut. ...das meiste, was hier erzählt wird, könnte heute ebenso oder ähnlich geschehen.“⁹ Within the whole thirteen chapters of the story, even God’s name(s) is (relatively) rarely mentioned.¹⁰

Not so in the midrash. Whenever it seems necessary to support their own view, the rabbis invent also divine interference as an explanation for human activity or inactivity, as the case may be.¹¹ Nevertheless, these divine interferences in talmudic literature are only one significant step beyond the simple statement in the Pseudepigraphical work *The Testament of Joseph* which involves God, but without mentioning any specific miracles:

“I struggled with a shameless woman who kept prodding me to transgress with her, but the God of my father rescued me from the burning flame” (2,1).¹²

In contrast to *The Testament of Joseph* and the above-mentioned midrashic traditions, Midrash Psalms *Shocheh-Tov* not only avoids any negative view of Joseph at this point, but also definitely emphasizes that Joseph did not ever touch Potiphar’s wife and never had even any intention to do so. He chooses, by his own free will, not to sin, without any kind of divine interference at all, precisely like the Biblical narrative itself:

“And... his master’s wife cast her eyes upon Joseph, and said, ‘Lie with me’. But *he refused*... And although she spoke to Joseph day after day, *he would not listen to her*, to lie with her or to be with her. But one day... she caught him by his garment, saying, ‘lie with me’. But *he left his garment in her hand, and fled* and got out of the house”.

Accordingly, due to Joseph’s excellent character there was no need for a metaphysical power to keep him away from the married woman. Indeed, in Midrash Psalms 81,7 it is related:¹³

“In the verse *He appointed it* (שָׁמוֹ / *samo*) in *Jehoseph* for a testimony (Ps 81,6), *al-tiqre samo, ella šemo* (שָׁמוֹ; read not ‘he appointed it’ but ‘his name’). *Jeh* [which is

⁹See C. Westermann, *Die Joseph-Erzählung* (Calwer Taschenbibliothek 1; Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1990), p. 9. This does not mean, however, that one must consider the Joseph story as a Greek novel, as some scholars did.

¹⁰See especially in chapter 41 (Pharaoh’s dreams), verses 16. 25 // 28. 32. 38-39. 51-52 (God / Elohim); but also Gen 39,3,5 (Lord); 43,14 (*El Shaddai*). 23; 44,16; 46,2; 50,24-25 (God). The divine plan is specified only twice, both times in Joseph’s speech to his brothers. One is in Gen 45,5-9; while the other is actually a parallel repetition of the first, when Joseph reaffirms his promises to them after Jacob’s death (50,19-20). This feature of the Biblical narrative to furnish the reader with a short statement indicating that God’s hidden hand directs all events and human acts is also known from elsewhere (Jud 14,4; 2 Sam 17,14; 1 Kgs 12,15 // 2 Chr 10,15). Later on the concept appears also in Matt 26,24: “The Son of man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed”.

¹¹Just for instance, it is worthy refer to the rabbinic interpretation on Gen 37,15 “And *a man* found him (= Joseph) wandering in the fields”. In Tanchuma (Buber), Parashat Wayyesheb, 2 the rabbis identified “a *man*” with an *angel* Gabriel, to show a God’s guidance of Joseph. See also Rashi’s commentary on the verse, and compare with that of Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra.

¹²Compare *The Testament of Joseph* 9,5 (Kee, “Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs”, pp. 819, 821); Jubilees 39,6.

¹³See Buber, *Midrash Tehillim*, p. 368; for the English translation compare Braude, *The Midrash on Psalms*, vol. II, p. 57. For another explanation of the name *Jehoseph*, see for example, Babylonian Talmud, *Sotah* 10b.

part of *Jehoseph*], that is the name of the Holy One, blessed be He, testified that Joseph had not touched Potiphar's wife."¹⁴

In fact, while the short form of the theophoric name *Joseph* appears 206 times in the Hebrew Bible, the full one *Jehoseph* occurs only in Ps 81,6. Therefore, the rabbis interpreted the unusual spelling of the name, by utilizing the formula *al-tiqre ... ella*, a well known rabbinic exegetical device.¹⁵ By applying a minor change in the vocalization of the consonants שמו, the rabbis reveal a completely different interpretation, far from the simple meaning (פשיט) of the original text.¹⁶ This interpretation, however, is not suggested as an alternative to the simple meaning, rather as an addition to it, which generally supported some rabbis' view. What is their intention in this case?

The incident with his master's wife takes precedence in importance over all of Joseph's positive and responsible actions: wisdom in elucidating dreams, his official responsibilities as an Egyptian ruler, and the salvation of the entire population of the Land of the Nile and his own family from starvation. God himself testifies that Joseph overcame his sexual desires and refused Potiphar's wife's proposal to lie together. Already in the first century CE this merit of Joseph was used in 4 Maccabees 2,1-6 as a model for overcoming sexual passions.¹⁷ Of course, the rabbis, as usual, attempted also to derive some moral and ethical virtues from the story. However, why does Midrash Psalms stress specifically this virtue in Joseph's biography? It is reasonable to assume that by emphasizing this point, the rabbis tried to address those who inquired concerning the reliability of the story in the Book of Genesis.

¹⁴Another example, according to the Babylonian Talmud, *Sotah* 36b, "At the moment when Pharaoh said to Joseph, *And without you shall no man lift up his hand...* (Gen 41,44) Pharaoh's astrologers exclaimed, 'Will you set in power over us a slave whom his master bought for twenty pieces of silver?' He replied to them, 'I discern in him royal characteristics'. They said to him, 'In that case he must be acquainted with the seventy languages'. Gabriel came and taught [Joseph] the seventy languages...", in order to prepare him to be a qualified governor of Egypt (cf. Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer 39; Friedländer, *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, p. 306). Once again, in Midrash Psalms the rabbis refrain from introducing elements of divine interference, and prefer to interpret without miraculous elements when possible: "When Pharaoh sought to make Joseph governor, all his legislators protested: 'Should a slave be a ruler?' As soon as Joseph began to govern, he had the senators seized and bound and then bided his time. When his brothers came and made it known that he was of good stock, Joseph had the senators dragged about with ropes" (Midrash Psalms 105,7; Buber, *Midrash Tehillim*, p. 451; for the English translation compare Braude, *The Midrash on Psalms*, vol. II, p. 183; and cf. Babylonian Talmud, *Sotah* 13b).

¹⁵On the use of this device in rabbinic literature, see C. McCarthy, *The Tiqqune Sopherim* (OBO 36; Freiburg/Schweiz: Universitätsverlag and Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981), pp. 139-166.

¹⁶It is the most usual sort of *al-tiqre* in the Babylonian Talmud and the midrashim. For similar examples, see McCarthy, *The Tiqqune Sopherim*, p. 141 (the example under discussion is not mentioned there). Noteworthy to mention, that in the Babylonian Talmud, *Sotah* 36b, the unusual spelling of Joseph's name is related to an aggadic interpretation: "Gabriel came and taught [Joseph] the seventy languages, but he could not learn them. Thereupon [Gabriel] added to his name a letter from the Name of the Holy One, blessed be He, and he learned [the languages] as it is said, *He appointed it in Jehoseph for a testimony* [Ps 81,6], ...".

¹⁷It is very difficult to date precisely the composition of the 4 Maccabees. Presumably the book is, as Anderson considered, "roughly contemporaneous with the mission and letters of the Apostle Paul", see H. Anderson, "Maccabees, Books of - Fourth Maccabees", *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York / London / Toronto / Sydney / Auckland: Doubleday, 1992), vol. 4, pp. 452-454 esp. 453.

Although there is no allusion to this sort of inquiry in Midrash Psalms, it occurs in another rabbinic work:

“A matron asked Rabbi Jose: ¹⁸ ‘Is it possible that Joseph, at seventeen years of age, with all the hot blood of youth, could act thus?’ Thereupon he produced the Book of Genesis and read the stories of Reuben [with Bilha, Gen 35,22] and Judah [with Tamar, Gen 38]. If Scripture did not suppress aught in the case of these, who were older and in their father’s home, how much more in the case of Joseph, who was younger and his own master [Had he really been guilty, Scripture would certainly not have concealed it]” (Genesis Rabbah 87,10).¹⁹

Let us not forget that we are dealing not just with a young man, seventeen years old, with “all the hot blood of youth” and passion, but also with someone who has lived alone, far away from home, family (specifically his father), land and cultural roots. He was under intense pressure, “day after day” (Gen 39,10), with a powerful woman, a minister’s wife (*ibid.*, 37,36; 39,1), who begged him repeatedly “lie with me” (*ibid.*, 39,7), and once even caught him intimately in order to impose her sexual lusts upon him (*ibid.*, 39,11-12). Thus, there is no wonder that although the rabbis did not doubt the reliability of the Holy Scripture’s story, they did state that Joseph was actually saved from the transgression at the last minute, miraculously. However, there were others who questioned the credibility of the Biblical story. Presumably, against such a background Midrash Psalms states clearly, without any hesitation, that no one less than God himself testifies that Joseph without any outsider interference, in spite of all the unusual circumstances, did not touch Potiphar’s wife!

In the light of this statement in *Shocheh-Tov*, it is quite surprising that Joseph was never called in this Midrash הַצַּדִּיק, “the righteous one” (which was probably based on the uncommon conduct with his master’s wife),²⁰ as in many other sources.²¹ However, in another place Midrash Psalms glorifies the extraordinary virtue of Joseph, particularly relating to his behavior in this incident.

¹⁸He could be identified, probably, with Rabbi Jose Ben Chalaphtha, the fourth generation of Tannaim (ca. mid-second century CE). There are many stories about his disputes with “a matron”, see also, for instance, Tanchuma (Buber), 11,2.

¹⁹Theodor - Albeck, *Bereschit Rabba*, pp. 1070-1071; and compare to the parallel version of the story in Yalkut Shimeoni, 145. For the English translation cf. Freedman - Simon, *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, p. 811 (here it appears under section 87,6).

²⁰See L. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1925), vol. 5, p. 325; Kugel, *In Potiphar’s House*, p. 25. However, in Midrash Tanchuma (Buber), Noah, 5, another reason is given for this: “So also Joseph: Inasmuch as he fed the creatures for seven years, he was called righteous, as stated (in Amos 2,6): *because they sell a righteous one for silver*. Thus, because he fed the creatures for seven years, he was therefore called righteous”. For the English translation cf. J.T. Townsend, *Midrash Tanhuma - Translated into English with Introduction, Indices and Brief Notes* (S. Buber Recension; Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 1989), vol. I, p. 35.

²¹See, for instance, in some manuscripts of Avot de-Rabbi Nathan, version B, chapter 16 (Schechter, *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan*, p. 36 note 8); Babylonian Talmud, *Kethuboth* 111a; Genesis Rabbah 93,7; Numbers Rabbah 14,6; Midrash Hagadol on Genesis 47,22; Pesikta Rabbati, at the end of chapter 3 (Friedmann, *Pesikta Rabbati*, p. 12). This title has been given to Joseph according to the verse “they have sold for silver a righteous man” (Amos 2,6), which was expounded by rabbis about him, see Tanchuma (Buber), Noah, 5 (above, note 20); Tanchuma (Jelamdenu) Parashat Wayyeshheb, 2; Pseudo-Jonathan on Gen 37,28.

III. Joseph's Righteousness

On his death-bed, Joseph adjured his brethren that his bones be carried up out of Egypt unto the land of Canaan (Gen 50,24-25). The Biblical story relates that Joseph's corpse was placed "in a coffin in Egypt" (Gen 50,26),²² and later on Moses complied with the request (Ex 13,19).²³ Indeed, Midrash Psalms 15,6 praises Moses who "despised Egypt's plunder... for while all Israel were busy taking spoil, Moses was busy taking up the bones of Joseph".²⁴ This eulogy is based, probably, on one of the earlier rabbinic sources, such as the halachic midrash, *Mechilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* (Masechta Beshalach, 1),²⁵ *Tosefta, Sotah* 4,7.²⁶ Nonetheless, in addition, *Shocher-Tov* points out that the righteousness of Joseph was the reason for the division of the Red Sea:

"The sea saw it, and fled (Ps 114,3)... Another explanation: The sea beheld Joseph's coffin coming down into the water. The Holy One, blessed be He, said: Let the sea flee from him who fled from transgression, he of whom it is said, *He... fled forth* (Gen 39,13). And so the sea fled from before Joseph, as is said: *The sea saw it, and fled*" (Midrash Psalms 114,9).²⁷

Glorified here by the rabbis the unusual righteousness of Joseph, shows that it contained an extraordinary potential, which could cause even change in nature's order, a great miracle. This specific aggadic feature of the midrash is well known also from other rabbinic sources, for instance Targum Ruth 1,6; 3,7.8.²⁸

²²The author does not indicate in which kind of coffin, where in Egypt the corpse was put, and why specifically there and not elsewhere. The rabbinic midrashim filled in these gaps. Concerning the bones of Joseph, three main types of legend survived in a variety of aggadic sources (some of them are listed above). The first type is set against an Egyptian mythological background. For the comparative analysis of this material, see J. Heinemann, *Aggadah and its Development - Studies in the Transmission of Traditions* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1974), pp. 49-56 (Hebrew). However, Heinemann does not refer to the traditions in Midrash Psalms.

²³This action is also alluded to in Ben Sira 49,15. According to Josh 24,32 the Israelites buried the bones of Joseph in Shechem. The rabbis explained this as a closure of a circle: "My brothers, you have stolen me from Shechem while I was alive, I pray you, return my bones to Shechem" (Exodus Rabbah 20,19; cf. *Mechilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, Masechta Beshlach, 1; Horovitz - Rabin, *Mechilta d'Rabbi Ismael*, p. 80; Babylonian Talmud, *Sotah* 13b).

²⁴Buber, *Midrash Tehillim*, p. 118; Braude, *The Midrash on Psalms*, vol. I, 193.

²⁵See Horovitz - Rabin, *Mechilta d'Rabbi Ismael*, pp. 78-79.

²⁶See M.S. Zuckermandel [ed.], *Tosefta Based on the Erfurt and Vienna Codices* [2nd edn.; Jerusalem: Bamberger & Wahrmann, 1937], pp. 299-300; S. Lieberman, *Tosefta Ki-Feshutah - A Comprehensive Commentary on the Tosefta* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1973), Part VIII, pp. 647-651. See as well their parallels in later collections like Babylonian Talmud, *Sotah* 13a; Exodus Rabbah 20,19.

²⁷Buber, *Midrash Tehillim*, p. 475; Braude, *The Midrash on Psalms*, vol. II, p. 221-222 esp. 221.

²⁸On this source, see Y. Komlosh, *The Bible in the Light of the Aramaic Translations* (Tel Aviv: Bar Ilan University Press & Dvir, 1973), p. 84 and the earlier bibliography which was cited there in note 74 (Hebrew). For the English translation of the Targum, see D.R.G. Beattie, *The Targum of Ruth* (The Aramaic Bible 19; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), pp. 18, 26-27.

IV. *Mete out Evil unto Wickedness: Potiphar's Punishment*

As soon as Joseph's master heard his wife saying, "after this manner did your servant to me", his wrath was kindled (Gen 39,19-20). He believed without hesitation her false allegations that Joseph had tried to rape her.²⁹ Potiphar did not bother even to hear the version of his loyal slave, nor attempt to investigate the accusations, and handle them in a judicial manner. He immediately punished the unprotected servant by sending him to prison.³⁰ Because of Potiphar's irresponsible behavior, the innocent Joseph was jailed several years. There is no allusion in the Hebrew Bible if, when, and how Potiphar was penalized for this.

The Sages could not tolerate this injustice in the world of a just God. Accordingly, they attempted to 'correct' the story as much as possible. Some of them claimed that Potiphar actually did not believe his wife's accusations, for if he really did, he would have certainly executed Joseph.³¹ They state that Potiphar clarified to Joseph:

"I know that you are innocent, but I have to do this lest a stigma fall upon my children (as the children of a prostitute, if I do not pretend to believe her)" (Genesis Rabbah 87,9).³²

Presumably, such Potiphar's justification was unacceptable to the rabbis of Midrash Psalms 105,7. They interpreted Ps 105,22: "*To bind his minister(s)* - to bind Potiphar, as Rabbi Meir³³

²⁹On this point, see especially Genesis Rabbah 87,19: "*And it came to pass, when his master heard, etc.* Rabbi Abbahu said: This happened during cohabitation" (Theodor - Albeck, *Bereschit Rabba*, p. 1074; Freedman - Simon, *The Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, p. 812). Cf. the Rashi's commentary on Gen 39,19: "She said this when he was alone with her, caressing her. This is what she meant by '*things like these did your servant do to me*' - caresses such as these." See, however, Nachmanides' critical view on these opinions, in his commentary on the same verse.

³⁰From a literary-topological viewpoint only, it is noteworthy to compare this phenomenon with that in the Egyptian folktale of the Two Brothers, "Anpu and Bata" (ca. 14th century BCE), see J.A. Wilson, in J.B. Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (= ANET; 3rd edn.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 23-25; Y.M. Grintz, *From the Ancient Egyptian Literature* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1975), pp. 59-63 (Hebrew); M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature - A Book of Readings*, Vol. II: *The New Kingdom* (Berkeley / Los Angeles / London: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 203-211. For occurrence of the essential lines of the story in world literature, see J.D. Yohannan (ed.), *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife in World Literature* (New York: A New Directions Book, 1968). Yohannan is concerned more with similarities and differences among the tales than with their possibly historical association. Indeed, it is reasonable to say, that "some stories resemble each other *because* they were diffused from a common source, and others *despite* the fact that they were independently created" (*ibid.*, p. 2).

³¹According to Pseudo-Jonathan on Gen 39,10, Potiphar even investigated some of the accusations against Joseph and found them false, and that's why he avoided killing him. Compare, however, the same Targum on Gen 47,22 which reveals an opposite opinion.

³²Theodor - Albeck, *Bereschit Rabba*, pp. 1074-1075; for the English translation cf. Freedman - Simon, *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, p. 812. Theodor - Albeck (*ibid.*, p. 1075 on the notes apparatus) quote another version as well: "If I will not believe her, there will be a quarrel between us".

³³He was from the fourth generation of the Tannaim (ca. mid-second century CE). However, in manuscript no. 6 of the midrash appears the name: "R. Iddi", which was the name of several *Amoraim*.

taught: This verse proves that Pharaoh kept Potiphar bound up in chains all his life; though it is written שָׂרֵי "his minister", it is pronounced שָׂרֵי "his ministers".³⁴

V. How Long was Joseph Imprisoned?

The great hate of the brethren towards Joseph caused him to be moved from the safety of his home to being enslaved in a foreign land. Here, the great "love" of Potiphar's wife towards him, and his refusal to satisfy her desire and passion lead him to jail. He was falsely accused by her, and was imprisoned by his master (Gen 39,6b-20). The Biblical narrative does not account for the number of years that he was forced to waste in jail. Midrash Tanchuma (Buber; Parashat Wayyeshab, 9) states that Joseph should have been imprisoned for *ten* years only.³⁵ Exodus Rabbah adds: "on account of slandering his *ten* brothers". Obviously, the rabbis attempted here to justify, theologically, and explain why the innocent Joseph should spend such a long time in prison, instead of being rewarded for his refusal to sin.

Several rabbinic sources (Genesis Rabbah 89,3,³⁶ Exodus Rabbah 7,1, Pseudo-Jonathan, the Fragmentary Targum on Gen 40,23, and Midrash Psalms) stress that Joseph's term of imprisonment was extended two years from that originally planned by the Almighty. The explanation for this is that he placed his hope and trust, to be released from prison, in a mortal (the Pharaoh's chief butler) rather than in God:

"For after Joseph said to the chief of the butlers: *Have me in your remembrance when it shall be well with you, ... and make mention of me unto Pharaoh* (Gen 40,14), the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Joseph: For having spoken thus, as you live, you will spend two years longer in prison, as is said *And it came to pass at the end of two full years* (Gen 41,1). Hence *Until the time that his word came to pass*" (Midrash Psalms 105,6).³⁷

As alluded to in the Fragmentary Targum, the core of this explanation was based, probably, on the concept stated in Jer 17,5-8: "Cursed is the man that trusts in man, and makes flesh his arm... Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, and whose trust the Lord is...".³⁸ However, it seems that the rabbis could provide another interpretation for the span of two years in which Joseph had been totally forgotten by the chief butler, and remained in jail. They could interpret it as a part of God's comprehensive plan: If Joseph was mentioned earlier and released from prison before the Pharaoh's parallel dreams, he may have gone (or been re-sold by Potiphar) elsewhere, and would not have been available to elucidate the royal dreams, and thus would never have been appointed governor!³⁹ Presumably, the rabbis chose to interpret it as they did, because it corresponds to their actualization of the Holy Scripture. Through their interpretation of the ancient text, they attempted also to relay a theological message to a

³⁴See Buber, *Midrash Tehillim*, p. 451; Braude, *The Midrash on Psalms*, vol. II, p. 183. Compare Rashi's commentary on Ps 105,22.

³⁵For the rabbinical calculation of Joseph's term of slavery, see I. Kalimi, "Joseph's Slander of His Brethren - Perspectives on the Midrashic Interpretation in the Light of the Jewish - Christian Controversy", (forthcoming) note 3.

³⁶See Theodor - Albeck, *Bereschit Rabba*, pp. 1088-1089.

³⁷See Buber, *Midrash Tehillim*, p. 451; Braude, *The Midrash on Psalms*, vol. II, pp. 182-183.

³⁸Cf. this concept with that in 2 Chr 16,12 (an 'addition' to 1 Kgs 15,23).

³⁹For such an explanation, compare A.B. Ehrlich, *Mikrā ki-Pheschut ō*, vol. I: *Divre Tora* (Berlin: M. Poppelauer's Buchhandlung, 1899; reprinted: Library of Biblical Studies; New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1969), p. 110 (Hebrew).

contemporary audience, who lived in problematic circumstances under foreign rulers: Do not put your trust and hopes in princes and kings but in God himself only, then the redemption will come on time.⁴⁰ Consequently, they tried to avoid many disappointments in exile.

The punishment was appropriate, once again, “measure for measure”: Through his trust in a mortal man, Joseph used *twice* the root זכר (זכרתני) “have me in your remembrance,... and make mention of me”), accordingly he was punished for *two* more years in prison. By the utilization of this judicial principle, the rabbis tried repeatedly to demonstrate the integrity and accuracy of heavenly judgment.

VI. When was Joseph Liberated From Jail?

The Biblical narrative accounts that Joseph was released from prison at the end of two full years (Gen 41,1ff.), but does not furnish us with any information concerning the precise date on which Joseph was freed. Once more, the rabbis filled in this gap:

“The end of the verse, *When he went out through the land of Egypt* (Ps 81,6b), implies, so our masters taught, that on *Rosh-Hashanah* (= New Year’s Day), Joseph left his prison, for the next verse (*ibid.*, 7) reads: *I removed his shoulder from under the burden*” (Midrash Psalms 81,7).⁴¹

Indeed, one can include this midrash as an example of the rabbis’ custom to ascribe several ‘historical events’ to a known Jewish Holiday/Feast.⁴² As a matter of fact, this admission appears among other ‘events’ which were enumerated by the *beraita* which is cited in the Babylonian Talmud, *Rosh-Hashanah* 10b-11a:

“It has been taught: R. Eliezer⁴³ says: In Tishri the world was created; in Tishri Patriarchs were born; in Tishri the Patriarchs died; on Passover Isaac was born; on New Year Sarah, Rachel and Hannah were visited (נפקדי); on New Year Joseph went forth from prison; on New Year bondage of our ancestors in Egypt ceased; ...”⁴⁴

The date of Joseph’s release from prison on the New Year, has dual importance. It shows not only the notability of the holiday on which such a personality was released; but also the significance of the figure itself: Joseph’s freedom was regained on one of the major Jewish high-holidays. Symbolically, he opened a new page in his life precisely at the beginning of the New Year.

⁴⁰For such a plausible actualization, cf. J. Bowker, *The Targums and Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 251.

⁴¹Buber, *Midrash Tehillim*, p. 368; Braude, *The Midrash on Psalms*, vol. II, p. 57.

⁴²See I. Heinemann, *The Methods of the Aggadah* (2nd edn.; Jerusalem: Magnes Press & Massadah, 1974), pp. 31-32 (Hebrew).

⁴³Probably, he was Eliezer Ben Horkenos, from the second generation of the Tannaim, about the second half of the first century.

⁴⁴The *Gemara* continues and cites also R. Joshua’s opinion on this issue, who states, *inter alia*, that “on New Year Joseph went forth from prison”.

VII. Conclusion

Midrash Tehillim *Shocheh-Tov* avoids any negative view of Joseph in the episode concerning Potiphar's wife. It rejects possible doubts about the reliability of the Biblical story, and emphasizes that God himself testifies that Joseph did not touch her. He was loyal to his master all the way. Because of his fine moral character there was no need for interference of divine forces to keep him away from Potiphar's wife. The midrash has derived some ethical virtues from glorification of the uncommon righteousness of Joseph in this incident, and points it out as the reason for the division of the Red Sea. Contrarily, Joseph's term of imprisonment was extended two years from that originally planned by the Almighty, because he placed his hope and trust to be released from prison, in a mortal rather than in God. Joseph was released from prison on New Year's day, a sign of his notability. Potiphar was penalized for irresponsible behavior which caused the innocent Joseph to be jailed.

The Sages of Midrash Psalms presented Joseph as a perfect man physically,⁴⁵ morally, socially and religiously; as a model for one of the finest personalities of all generations. However, they did not refrain from criticizing some of Joseph's behavior. They considered him like many other Biblical figures, that is, after all he was a human being, and as such was not excluded from the framework of the concept: "Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins" (Eccl 7,20).⁴⁶

⁴⁵See I. Kalimi, " 'He was Born Circumcised' - Some Midrashic Sources, Their Concept, Roots and Presumably Historical Context", forthcoming.

⁴⁶Similarly in the prayer of Solomon, 1 Kgs 8,46b // 2 Chr 6,36b.