

The Fights of the Lord and the Fights of the Ladies

by Aurel Ionica

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Since Lot chose the wrong *lot* and Abraham chose the right one, God promised not only that Abraham's descendants would enjoy that good lot that he chose, but the whole world would be blessed with the same *lot* so that today we should not see any more of Lot's choice in the world but only Abrahams and the people like him, right? After so many thousands of years, is it not about time for God to fulfill his promise to Abraham? The obvious question that an ancient reader would have asked at this point is: How come that Lot's descendants are seen everywhere and Abrahams are nowhere to be found and those who claim to be descendants of Abraham are perfect clones of Lot and have no resemblance to Abraham at all? Yes, Lot's descendants may have changed their clubs into nuclear bombs and the greatest killers claim Abraham as their ancestor and his *faith* as their belief, but except the magnitude of the killing, nothing has changed. That Abraham failed in his dream to establish a different kind of world so that the world is just as full of evil as it has been since Cain killed his brother was a fact that no intelligent reader would fail to recognize and the author of Genesis, who was writing for intelligent readers, wanted to explain why the world has always been the way it is no matter when and where you happen to live in it. That Abraham failed to create descendants in his own image is what any intelligent reader would have wanted the author of Genesis to explain and in what follows everything must revolve around the answer to this question. True, Abraham may have been a unique individual in dealing with Lot, by befriending the Amorites and by his mediation for Sodom, but does it mean that he was such an ideal individual in everything he did and particularly in making sure that he not only would have many descendants, but his descendants would be copycats of him? Do the following stories try to prove how Abraham was consistently an outstanding individual who lived in stark contrast with his contemporaries – and particularly his modern *civilized* descendants – or did he fail in his whole enterprise and how that failure is explained? This is what an ancient reader would have expected the author of Genesis to explain in what follows and this is what we ourselves should look for when reading these stories. As any reader would expect, the ending of Lot's story is followed by the continuation of Abraham's story:

Thus both the daughters of Lot became pregnant by their father. The firstborn bore a son, and named him Moab; he is the ancestor of the Moabites to this day.

The younger also bore a son and named him Ben-ammi; he is the ancestor of the Ammonites to this day. From there Abraham journeyed toward the region of the Negeb, and settled between Kadesh and Shur. While residing in Gerar as an alien, Abraham said of his wife Sarah, "She is my sister." And King Abimelech of Gerar sent and took Sarah (Gen 19:36–20:20).

Oops! Did Abraham learn anything from his experience in Egypt? Of course, *critical* scholars would explain these repeated behaviors of the biblical characters as being *duplicate* stories created by different authors whom they have labeled with letters such as J, E, or P, and if there are some different details in similar stories is because each writer wrote down different traditions that had slightly different details in the story. Consequently, one tradition had it that Abraham went to Egypt to offer his wife as a sister to the local ruler to enjoy the privilege that high connections offered, while another tradition had it that Abraham did that while being in Gerar, and since there is another very similar story about Abraham's son Isaac, that proves that there was another tradition according to which the story is about Isaac and not Abraham. Since the one who wrote Genesis was not an *author* in the sense of being able to write down something that was original but was actually a *collector* of stories that had been already written down by others and now are considered his *sources* since he was not the actual *source* of what he wrote, we end up with this Genesis that is a salad of stories strung together without any meaningful connection between them. How come that the author copied stories that were so similar in which the same character does the same stupid thing over again without learning anything? Well, since the writer was actually a *collector* of stories, he did not want to harmonize them and eliminate duplicates just as a collector of stamps would not want to retouch some stamps that seem to represent the same event or character and eliminate duplicates because the value of a collection consists in having as many stamps as possible and in their original condition. Another popular theory is that these *duplicates* are not the results of different stories that existed as different traditions and later as different documents, but actually the result of *literary conventions*.¹ According to this theory, whoever in ancient times wanted to write something followed *literary conventions* according to which characters had to do things according to stereotypes. For instance, if a character was unmarried and ran away from home, upon arrival in a foreign place would meet at the well a beautiful maiden whom he would marry and live happily thereafter, or if he was married and moved to a foreign place, would offer his beautiful wife to the local ruler passing her as his sister. Of course, the author had the freedom to fill in the names of the characters and of the places as he pleased and that explains why we find in these stories different names and different places, but whatever the characters do in those places is decided by the *literary conventions* from which the author could not depart probably because no publisher

¹ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, rev. and updated ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

would have accepted to publish such unorthodox stories and no reader would have accepted to read them. Therefore, no reader would read a story in which a hero, instead of offering his wife to the local ruler as his sister, would claim her as his wife and prefer to die defending her. If an ancient author wrote a story about a foreigner who died defending his beautiful wife who was coveted by the local ruler, which ancient reader would have read such a story that broke the *literary conventions*? Ancient writings were just like Hollywood movies – and Alter uses precisely this illustration – in which all heroes manage to bring down the villains with their guns and the movies differ only in the way they do it and the names of the places and characters. What Alter does not explain is who set up those *literary conventions* at a time when the vast majority of the population were not only illiterate, but had never seen a written document in their whole life. Apparently, he imagines that ancient people had meetings like modern scholarly conferences where they present papers in which they set up the standards that all scholars should follow blindly, otherwise a paper or a book is never accepted for publication. And according to him, writing something following those *conventions* in which you can change just the name of the characters and eventually the places is an *art* and not something *dumb*. Whether the one who wrote Genesis was a dumb *collector* or a dumb writer who followed blinding literary conventions we do not know, but the problem I have with these explanations is precisely the fact that they presuppose that Genesis was the product of someone stupid, and I find that presupposition to be simply ridiculous. Therefore, if there are duplicates in the story, they must have been included intentionally, and if the same character does the same stupid thing twice, that is the best way of telling that the character did not learn anything from an experience, and if another character later does the same thing, is again the best way of telling that someone does not want to learn from the experience of someone else and wants to learn it himself the hard way. As we have seen so often, the style used by ancient writers is very different from the modern ones, and one of the features of the style used by the author of Genesis – which has been noticed even by *critical* scholars – is that authors never describe the minds of their characters but only their actions so that the readers are expected to figure out what is going on in the minds of the characters by analyzing the actions of the characters – the only things that the author describes. For instance, the author of Genesis would never say that Abraham was smart, or coward, or brave, or angry, or had a bad idea, and so on. Instead, he would describe the *actions* of a character because he thought that it was the responsibility of the readers to figure out from the actions of the character what the character was thinking, feeling, and so on, and whether the character was smart, stupid, brave, and so on. A modern writer would tell us first what goes on in the mind of a character such as that the character had a stupid idea, and then tell us something stupid that that character did, and then the reader would think that the writer was really smart because was able to read the character's mind before that character did anything. Ancient writers, however, would have found

such readers really stupid if they do not realize that when modern writers tell what a character has in mind is what actually the writer has in mind and therefore there is no mindreading involved because all that modern writers have to do is just to read their own minds and write accordingly. The reason modern writers would tell their readers first that the character had a stupid idea and then tell something stupid that the character did is because modern writers assume that their readers are stupid and if they just told their readers that the character did something stupid without telling their readers that what the character did was stupid, then the readers would not be able to judge that what the character did was stupid. By contrast, ancient writers – and even more so the biblical writers – assumed that only intelligent readers would read what they write and one of the greatest pleasures in reading was precisely that of discovering what the writer is telling by providing the minimum amount of clues. Could ancient readers go wrong and read in the story exactly the opposite of what the writer intended? Of course! For instance, could an ancient reader take the story about Abraham passing his wife as a sister to end in bed with a ruler in a garden of Eden like Egypt so that he enjoys privileges and God not only has no problem with that, but would even reward Abraham? Of course, ancient readers could be just as stupid as modern fundamentalist and *critical* scholars. If a reader wants to be stupid and conclude that Abraham did something smart when he did something stupid, why tell the reader that what Abraham did was stupid so that he cannot read the story the way he wanted? If there are readers who are so stupid as to waste their time to read but do not care what the writer wants to say because they only want to read whatever is in their heads, why not let them have the pleasure? Since the writer of Genesis only wrote for intelligent readers, he expected readers to ask themselves why the writer includes such wired stories as that Abraham going to Egypt accompanied by Lot, then the one about Melchizedek, then the destruction of Sodom that is specifically compared with Egypt, and so on, then put all the stories together and come to the conclusion that while Abraham did something stupid when going to Egypt, for Lot it was a great idea because he ended up liking such places so much that when he had the opportunity to live in a similar place, he did not hesitate to go there only to be expelled from there just as had been expelled from Egypt and eventually ended up living in a cave and even having sex with his own daughters just like wild animals. Once the readers manage to connect the stories, they not only discover the pleasure of understanding what the author is trying to say, but also experience the pleasure of learning something important, that is, that such places may be attractive and people may be lured to go there and live as immigrants hoping to enjoy a better life, but there are prices that have to be paid when living in such *civilized* places, and one better learns about such places from reading a text rather than learn it the hard way by experiencing it personally.

If, however, the story about Abraham going to Egypt and passing his wife as a sister was meant to explain the transformation that took place in Lot so that we understand the following stories including his ending up in a cave raping his own daughters, when the writer includes a story in which Abraham did exactly the same thing again when he went to Gerar, the same writer expects the readers to ask themselves the same question about why the writer includes such a story even if it was a *collected* story that someone else had written? As it was mentioned, *critical* scholars immediately start to fantasize that these were different versions of the same story written by different scribes or by different writers who followed some *literary conventions* according to which they could only write similar stories with only some details changed, but ancient readers did not have such smart theories so that they could only rely on common sense when reading such stories. Since for ancient readers the author of Genesis could not be such an idiot as to forget that he had told a very similar story earlier, they would have started to ask themselves what the writer is trying to tell about Abraham by having him do the same stupid thing over again? If the story had been about Lot, then the obvious answer would be that Lot was stupid and never learns anything from what he experiences, and even after his narrow escape from being killed by the Sodomites for being a foreigner, when forced to leave Sodom, he only accepted to move to another city and live there also as a foreigner. With Abraham, however, the explanation that he was stupid and never learned anything from what he experienced could not have been a valid explanation because obviously Abraham learned from that experience to stay away from gardens of Eden. If he kept passing his wife for a sister whenever he arrived in a new place where he was not known, there must have been a reason of his own, and readers knew that they were expected to start to scratch their heads to figure out what might be the reason since the author would not tell the readers what were Abraham's motives when doing something. What is strange about Abraham's behavior is not only for a husband to disclaim his relationship with his wife and even allow her to end up in bed with another man, but for Sarah to play along with such a game. Could it be that it was Sarah who did not want foreigners to know her marital status? An important fact that made it possible for them to play the game was that Sarah did not have children, otherwise she could no longer have claimed to be single while staying with a man who was also single although both were well past the marital age and she even had children. Since she was old enough to be married but was still staying with Abraham, being a sister was a good justification, although some may have smelled that something was fishy since Abraham himself was old enough to be married but did not have a wife, and even if it was true that they were siblings, it was not uncommon in ancient times for brothers and sisters to be in bed and even to get married. If Abraham and Sarah disclaimed to be married presenting their relationship as one among siblings, they must have used it to justify why they did not have children taking into account that in ancient times childlessness was considered a great misfortune if not a disgrace. Of course, they

could have acknowledged that they were married but Sarah was barren, but that would have brought public disgrace upon Sarah, and besides, it was not true that Sarah was barren so that it would have been difficult for her to bring disgrace upon herself by claiming to be barren when she herself knew very well that that was not true. That Sarah did have periods and that she knew that periods were proof of fertility the text is quite explicit: "Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women" (Gen 18:11). Of course, both fundamentalists and *critical* scholars would jump through the roof that Sarah was barren since God *made* her barren, but even if she knew that it was God who made her barren, what reason could she provide for the fact that God had made her barren? If women were indeed barren, did not ancient people believe that that was not only caused by God, but it was caused by God for a reason. What reason could Sarah provide that God made her barren? That God made her barren because God promised to bless her and Abraham with a multitude of children who eventually would fill the whole earth? Who could think of something more laughable? Since Sarah was Abraham's half-sister, claiming to be just siblings seemed to avoid all explanations and after all, who cared whether they stayed away from each other while in bed at night? What Abraham and Sarah seemed to underestimate is the pleasure that rulers and *civilized* people have to have sex with foreigners while hating foreigners so much, and when the local ruler learned that there was a foreigner around with a sister who was unmarried and most likely still virgin, he sent for the woman to be brought to him. At that point, what could Abraham have said? He found himself caught up in his own trap. According to the story, it was God who revealed to Abimelech the real relationship of Sarah with Abraham:

But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night, and said to him, "You are about to die because of the woman whom you have taken; for she is a married woman." Now Abimelech had not approached her; so he said, "Lord, will you destroy an innocent people? Did he not himself say to me, 'She is my sister'? And she herself said, 'He is my brother.' I did this in the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands." Then God said to him in the dream, "Yes, I know that you did this in the integrity of your heart; furthermore it was I who kept you from sinning against me. Therefore I did not let you touch her" (Gen 20:3-6).

This biblical God, whom no one has seen and who never talks to humans, when Abimelech was getting ready to have sex with Sarah, God put him to sleep to give him a dream to tell him the truth and prevent him from having sex with Sarah. Is there anything more believable? Although Sarah may have said herself that she was just Abraham's sister, when she found herself with Abimelech, most likely she had to tell him the truth since he would discover that she was not a virgin and that clarified the matter. The reason Sarah found herself in such situations was because she had a problem with her childlessness, and the problem was not that God had made her barren since that is something she would have not known anyway and at that time there were

no fertility tests, but she knew that her barrenness was of her own making, and the author of Genesis provided us with a clue when the divine messengers visited Abraham on their way to Sodom and they predicted that Sarah would have a child, she laughed because she simply found the idea ridiculous. Why would she find the idea ridiculous when in ancient times most people considered children a blessing? I said *most people* because there have always been people who considered children a burden if not a curse, and those are the so called *civilized* people. Abraham may have turned his back on *civilization*, but what readers have failed to notice is that there is no evidence that Sarah ever did. She was a lady, she liked to enjoy life, her husband was wealthy, why would she ruin her life – or even endanger it – by becoming pregnant and having children? Human offspring take many years to reach adulthood when they need constant care from the mother and if there are several children in succession, by the time all of them are on their own, the mother is too old to enjoy life – if she is still alive and had not been killed by diseases or one of her pregnancies. Why a woman who lives in a garden of Eden when she has so many things to enjoy would ruin her life with raising children when she can enjoy sex without the risk of becoming pregnant? Sounds familiar? Another important indicator of *civilization* besides xenophobia is childlessness. In *civilized* countries like the United States of America and Europe one of the most cherished *rights* of women is to have abortions although contraceptives are widely available. As a result, the higher the standard of living – and therefore of *civilization* – the lower is the childbirth rate so that in the most *civilized* countries the population is aging because there are fewer children who are born compared to the older people who die so that the countries eventually become depopulated if there were no immigrants who come with children because they view such places as gardens of Eden where they can enjoy a better life than what they had back home. The typical pattern of *civilized* people is to avoid having children and if they do decide to have any, it is usually very late in life. In societies that are at the subsistence level, however, children are important because they mean helping hands, even from an early age, doing time consuming chores that are not very demanding physically such as feeding the animals and taking care of them and freeing the adults to dedicate all their time to the more demanding jobs such as working the fields. In *civilized* societies, however, where people live in gardens of Eden because the dirty work is performed by slaves or by immigrants – which is the modern equivalent of slavery except that immigrants are treated worse than slaves – childbearing not only has no practical benefits, but restricts significantly the freedom of the parents, particularly of the mother, without taking into account the pain and discomfort involved, including the risks for the mother taking into account that before modern times when medical assistance was not available difficult pregnancies often resulted in the death of the mother as it happened to Jacob's favorite wife Rachel. Therefore, for *civilized* people, the tendency is to avoid having children as much as possible until later in life when the couple become aware that life is not endless

and there is no one close to be around them as they get old and inherit their wealth that means so much to them. Consequently, some try to have children when they could have had grandchildren and in *civilized* countries one can see people with children who are taken to be their grandchildren but are actually their children. When, however, they cannot have children anymore because of their age, often resort to adoptions and because gardens of Eden are in great shortage of children, usually the children are adopted from *uncivilized* countries where there is no shortage of children or where parents feel that they cannot support their children and accept to give up one or more in exchange for a sum of money that would enable the parents and the rest of the children survive. Of course, parents do not feel that they *sell* their children because they consider such children as fortunate because they will have a brighter future in the garden of Eden of their adopted parents. Because of the legal complications that are involved adopting children from other countries, the so called *civilized* countries have laws against what they call abuse of children so that children from poor families are taken by the government and placed in affluent families. What abuse of children is can range from spanking them for misbehaving to simply not providing them with all the fun that affluent families can afford, and since immigrants are regularly the poorest segment of the population, their children are a prime target for the governments of *civilized* countries to be taken away and placed in affluent families. In a case that attracted international attention, all five children of an immigrant family in an European country were removed from their parents by the government but no one will ever know how many similar cases occur in the so called *civilized* countries.²

The patterns that we see even today in the so called *civilized* societies is precisely what we discover in the stories about Abraham and Sarah. First, we notice that Abraham and Sarah are reluctant to acknowledge publicly their married status although they were actually married and therefore enjoyed having sex. That Sarah enjoyed sex she implicitly admits when she replies to the divine messengers who predicted that she would eventually give birth to a child: "So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, 'After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?'" (Gen 18:12). After receiving the same prediction, Abraham had exactly the same reaction by laughing, finding the idea ridiculous: "Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, 'Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old?'" (Gen 17:17). As Sarah grew older, however, she discovered the need for a child, and since she did not want to go through the pain and the trouble to give birth to it herself, she decided to have a slave girl play the role of a surrogate mother just as American and European families sometimes pay a woman from a poor country to become pregnant and give birth to a child who would be adopted by those *civilized* people: "Now Sarai, Abram's

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bodnariu_case (accessed June 23, 2016).

wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, and Sarai said to Abram, 'You see that the LORD has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.' *And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai*" [emphasis mine] (Gen 16:1–2). Contrary to how feminists read these stories about patriarchs and their *abused* wives, in Genesis it is always the women who make decisions and their *despotic* husbands just comply with whatever they are told, a pattern that we saw with Eve and Adam and we will see all over the Bible, including the New Testament. While Abraham does not seem to change as the stories progress, it is Sarah who changes, and as she changes, she sets the stage for all the others – including God himself – to play along with whatever she had decided. From not caring about having any children at all – indeed, not even admitting to being married – she eventually decides that she does want a child, but does not want to go through the trouble of pregnancy and instead decides to have a slave woman do the dirty – and painful and risky – job for her. Eventually she gets to the point where she is no longer satisfied with an adopted child so that she wants a child of her own, and she not only decides to have it, but even manages to give birth to a child, and that proves that she had been fertile all along taking into account that if she was fertile at an old age, she must have been even more fertile when she was young. After Hagar becomes pregnant, however, a conflict takes place between the two women:

So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-girl, and *gave her to her husband Abram as a wife*. He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. Then Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my slave-girl to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the LORD judge between you and me!" But Abram said to Sarai, "Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please." Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and *she ran away* from her [emphasis mine] (Gen 16:3–6).

Since there is another episode later when Hagar and Ishmael are actually sent away from home by Abraham, *critical* scholars start to fantasize that each story comes from different *sources* because different writers knew different versions as to when and how Hagar ran away and the dumb *collector* who put together Genesis just dumped together all these versions without making any sense of them just as one would dump soiled linen in a laundry basket. If one reads the text carefully, however, notices that there is a progression in the conflict between the two women. Of course, both fundamentalist and *critical* scholars assume that it was Hagar who caused the conflict, but the text makes clear that the conflict was the result of the confusion created by Abraham and Sarah as to the status of Hagar. She may have been Sarah's "slave-girl" all right, but Sarah gave her to Abraham "as a wife," so that naturally Hagar expected not to be treated as a slave-girl any more. Although Sarah claims that Hagar looked on her "with contempt,"

what most likely happened was that Hagar objected to being treated as a slave anymore since she had been elevated to the position of a secondary wife because that is what she really was. Obviously, Sarah took her objection as an insult and an act of insubordination and took the matter to Abraham as the husband of Hagar and therefore the one who had the responsibility to clarify Hagar's status and eventually to punish her. As Abraham's reply makes clear, he disclaims any marital relationship with Hagar, reaffirming her "slave-girl" status over whom Sarah had the power to treat her anyway she wanted. Naturally, when Sarah discovered that Abraham had no intention to defend Hagar, the text makes clear that Sarah became very abusive treating her worse than any other slave so that Hagar decided to run away. At this time, she was just pregnant while in the second episode Ishmael is already born so that the two episodes not only do not conflict in any detail, but they are placed in the proper order on the timeline and therefore the text is not produced by a confused *collector* who had no idea what he was writing. Since on this occasion Hagar ran away and was not sent away, she was treated as a fugitive slave and fugitive slaves were hunted down and brought back. Although the text explains that it was an angel who came out of the blue and persuaded Hagar to return home, most likely it was Abraham who sent other slave(s) to find her and bring her back because after all, she was pregnant with his own son who legally was also Sarah's son:

The angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. And he said, "Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" She said, "I am running away from my mistress Sarai." The angel of the LORD said to her, "Return to your mistress, and submit to her." The angel of the LORD also said to her, "I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude." And the angel of the LORD said to her, "Now you have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the LORD has given heed to your affliction. He shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him; and he shall live at odds with all his kin" (Gen: 16:7-12).

Since in the reality behind the story it was the slave owners who brought back their fugitive slaves, why does this writer need an angel to find Hagar and persuade her to return to her abusive mistress, particularly in a religious text in which the deity not only does not have any relationship with humans, but is not surrounded by lesser deities and assistants such as angels as they are understood today? As it was pointed out when mythology was discussed in a previous section, in ancient texts deities occur quite often and their role is to justify humans actions that cannot be justified rationally, or to change the reality behind the story that is unacceptable for the intended audience and replace it with a reality within the story that is more appealing to the intended audience. Why did God have to send an angel to bring Hagar back when Abraham could have easily found her and bring her back, or better, Hagar could have been brought back by another slave owner who found her since slaves had nowhere to run

and nowhere to hide and fugitive slaves were promptly caught by other slave owners and returned to their owners as a sacred duty in order to preserve the slavery system? Do not God's angels have better things to do? While the biblical deity talks a lot and is busy watching whenever Sarah had sex to make sure that she can have sex only with Abraham and remains pregnant only when he decides, there is a major difference between the role that the deity plays in mythological stories and the biblical stories.

Although mythology was discussed in a previous section, it is necessary to take a closer look at the roles played by deities in those stories. Although there is a chasm separating ordinary humans from deities symbolized by the fact that the gods live on the peak of the highest mountain, gods have full control over what happens to humans and what humans do because humans cannot avoid doing what the gods had decided. Although humans may be ignorant about what gods decide and do, often gods communicate their decisions to humans either by directly talking to them – as the goddess Athena instructed Odysseus how to carry out the massacre at home – or through human intermediaries such as oracles like Pythia or Calchas, or through various omens, and sometimes humans themselves could take the initiative and find out what are the intentions of the deities by approaching them through their priests as intermediaries, bringing sacrifices in order to find answers as to what was going to happen to them or to influence the deity to become favorable to them in some matters when they knew or assumed that the deity was hostile. The fundamental idea was that the only true free agents were the gods so that they were the real players deciding whatever happened in the world while the humans were more or less mere puppets in their hands doing what the gods had decided even when humans themselves did not like what they were doing because they had no choice to depart from the will of the gods. In other words, mythology and pagan religions had the role to establish a reasoned reality according to which whatever happened in humans societies and whatever humans did was decided arbitrarily by deities over whom humans had no control so that no one can be blamed or held accountable for what happened in the society since gods could not be held accountable by humans and humans cannot be held accountable for what they do since they cannot decide upon their own actions and have no control over what they do. In other words, mythology and pagan religions had the role to establish a reasoned reality that was ultimately irrational and the reason such stories were *enjoyed* was because they provided an explanation and a justification as to why humans have to live in such a world. And that begs the question: Why would humans enjoy literature that provides a justification as to why they live in an irrational world instead of rejecting and denouncing not only the irrational world that they lived in but also the literature that established and endorsed it? Although it may seem strange, such a reasoned reality that such literature establishes has the great advantage that it places all the responsibility for what happens in the society on the gods so that humans are freed from any

responsibility no matter how irrational or outrageous their actions may be. Regardless whether humans do willingly what the gods have decided or do it out of ignorance, since they do not have the choice to avoid doing what had been decided by gods, they cannot be held responsible for what happens and for the outcomes of their actions. Contrary to popular mentality, for most people, responsibility is a burden and not a privilege to be cherished and often responsibility for their actions has to be imposed upon them through a justice system. Therefore, when the gods decide what humans are going to do even before they are born and they eventually do what the gods had decided even when they do their best to avoid what the gods had decided as in the case of Oedipus, on what basis can they be blamed even when their actions are downright outrageous? As it is well known, an oracle informed the king of Thebes Laius that if he had a son, he would kill him and marry his mother at a time when incest was considered an abomination. Did Laius have the option to avoid fulfilling the prophecy? Since he had the option to avoid having sex with his wife, obviously no son would be born and therefore no one could kill him and marry his wife therefore he tried to avoid having sex with his wife, but one day he got drunk, could not control his sexual drive, and this just *happened* at the right moment for his wife to become pregnant, and sure enough, soon he had a son. Did he still have the option to avoid fulfilling the prophecy? Of course, by killing the son while the son was a baby, there would no longer be a son later to kill him and marry his wife, therefore he decided to kill his son by placing him on a mountain side to be killed by wild animals or to starve to death. Laius may have decided that Oedipus was going to die but since what happens to humans is not decided by humans but by gods and the gods had decided that Oedipus not only should be born, but he should live and eventually kill his father and marry his mother, the child is rescued, and after he grows up in another city, he returns, kills his father and marries his mother exactly as the gods had decided. Could the son of a king decide to kill the king and marry the queen because he wanted to be king and the only way to become king is to kill the king since there is another son who is the legitimate heir and if the son does not seize the throne by force he will never become king? Of course, but when someone killed a close relative, in ancient times he became *polluted* and had to go into exile because he could not be tolerated in the community so that, a son who was an illegitimate heir to the throne, instead of becoming king, he would end up as a fugitive. Who wants to be held responsible for deciding to kill the king in order to take his place? Enter divine oracle accompanied by human ignorance! Oedipus did not know who his parents were and when he was told that the gods had decided that he should kill his father and marry his mother, horrified, he ran away from his city to avoid fulfilling what the gods had decided only to head for the city where his real parents were rulers and happened to kill his father again, out of ignorance, not knowing that he was a king and his real father, so that Oedipus ends up crowned as king of Thebes because the citizens themselves were ignorant that Oedipus was the son of the murdered king and

that he was the murderer and therefore *polluted* and unqualified not only to be king, but even to be tolerated in the city. Could humans have remained forever ignorant about who Oedipus was and what he did? Well, that depends on what the gods decided and the gods decided that humans should learn the truth about Oedipus not when they crowned him as king, but after he had no less than four children with his supposed mother among whom there were two boys who were old enough to be kings themselves. Upon learning – from an oracle, of course – that he had killed his father and married his mother, horrified of what he had done, Oedipus blinded himself, went voluntarily into exile, his wife/mother hanged herself out of a guilty conscious that she had married the appointed king whom she had no option to refuse to marry, and his two sons, Polynices and Eteocles, were left to vie for the vacant throne. Why did the gods not reveal at his coronation through an oracle who Oedipus was and what he had done and spare the city of the disgrace of being ruled for decades by a *polluted* king and then send a pestilence upon the city in order to force the city to learn about what the king had done? Well, this is why this reasoned reality decided by the gods is so attractive: Don't ask, don't tell! Could the two sons of Oedipus decide that they were old enough to be kings and in order to get their father out of their way, they decided to blind him, send him into exile, claim that he blinded himself and voluntarily went into exile out of shame for what he had done to his father, hanged their mother because she did not want to cooperate by endorsing their story so that they actually executed her and pretended that she herself committed suicide out of shame? Of course, but who would want to believe it? Enter the oracle! Once the gods reveal that that humans only did what the gods had decided precisely by doing their best to avoid doing that, everything becomes acceptable because with gods, everything is not only possible, but unquestionable. Did the people really believe it? This is where reading mythology carefully is important just as reading carefully biblical stories is important. In mythological stories, we discover details that betray that the supposed decisions of the gods are just cover-ups for decisions and actions of humans that cannot be justified rationally and therefore the stories are used to exempt humans from their responsibility. How do we know this? Just as I said, by looking at the details in the story that suggest that the reality behind the story is different from the reality within the story created by those divine oracles. According to the story – and no doubt with the historical facts – after Oedipus went into exile, his two sons decided to share the throne by turns, each one for one year. For the first year, ... surprise ... surprise, it was the younger son, Eteocles, who came on the throne, while the older son, Polynices, went into exile in Argos. When Polynices came back to claim the throne after one year, Eteocles refused to cede it so that Polynices came with an army from Argos to take the throne by force, a war known as The Seven Against Thebes that ended with the two brothers killing each other in a personal duel so that the king of Thebes became Creon, the brother of Jocasta, the mother of the two brothers who supposedly committed

suicide. While the divine oracles help explain how Oedipus could kill his father and become king and later he had to step down and go into exile, they do not explain how come that the younger brother ended up on the throne and the older brother ended up in exile. Therefore, in the reality behind the story, Oedipus was deposed by his sons, most likely by Polynices, the legitimate heir to the throne, who blinded him in order to disable him to be king, sent him into exile that was the punishment for being *polluted* for killing his father, and by blinding Oedipus avoided to become *polluted* himself since he did not actually kill his father. Since the mother-queen did not want to cooperate either by marrying the new king or endorse the story of her sons, she was executed and the murder was officially ruled as suicide. Did people buy the story? Apparently not. Obviously Polynices was declared *polluted* and therefore had to go into exile and at that point made an agreement with his younger brother Eteocles to occupy the throne and keep the seat warm for him until he would return a year later when the hostility towards him would subside, with the promise that after another year, Eteocles would occupy the throne again for another year, and so on. When Polynices, however, returned after one year, Eteocles refused to cede the throne not only because he wanted it as badly as his older brother, but probably he realized that his brother had no intention to give up the throne after he finds himself on it, and the war that followed, was also the result of the confusion that followed as to who was the legitimate king. All literature on mythology harp on the idea that Polynices started war against his own city, but if he wanted to conquer his own city and not another one, he no doubt chose his own city because he knew that he had supporters in the city, and if he managed to eliminate his brother, he would be hailed as the legitimate king who removed a usurper. That he was viewed as the legitimate king and Eteocles as a usurper even by members of the royal house is proved by Antigone, one of the sister of the two brothers, who openly defended Polynices and was condemned to death. Although divine oracles provided justification for some human actions removing the responsibility from humans and placing it on the gods, those oracles cannot completely eliminate human responsibility so that even in these stories, humans continue to make judgments and often disagree. Was the younger brother the legitimate king, or was the older brother the legitimate one? Well, the rule was that the older brother was the legitimate king, but if the older brother is *polluted*, can he be a king? Again, was he *polluted* if he just blinded his father and did not actually kill him and his mother committed suicide? Well, if you cannot believe what he says because obviously he has a vested interest to lie in order to seize the throne, then he did it and obviously is *polluted*, but taking into account that the rule was that those who were *polluted* had to go into exile for about two years and if he is welcomed by the king of another city who accepts to perform a cleansing ritual for him, then the *pollution* is removed and the fugitive can safely return to the home city. Even if Polynices was *polluted* and by going into exile he may have accepted his guilt, since he not only was received by the king of Argos but even married his daughter, he obviously

must have considered that *pollution* removed even if he returned after just one year, and no doubt many in Thebes must have shared his point of view. Eventually the two brothers not only killed each other, but the whole city ended up in ruin, and who is to be blamed? Should humans accept the responsibility? Is it not better to place all the blame on the gods and not bother about what happens to you since it does not depend on you anyway?

Do biblical stories resort to divine interventions in order to justify human actions? Of course, they do! But are the divine actions and pronouncements meant to justify human actions that cannot be justified rationally? Well, this is where there is a fundamental difference between the Bible and mythology. Does the biblical God decide what a character like Abraham should do and Abraham has no choice to disobey? True, the text does say that God told Abraham to leave the city of Harran where he had settled in order to go somewhere else, but does it mean that Abraham did not have the option to disobey or that he himself had not decided already to leave that city because he thought that life there was evil? If Abraham had never thought about leaving that city and only decided to leave when God told him and he blindly obeyed as both fundamentalists and *critical* scholars read the story, then why does the writer tell us about the failure of the Tower of Babel that caused people to scatter, that Abraham himself was a refugee in Harran coming from that failed tower/city, that the kind of people he lived with in Harran were similar to the ones that he had left back in Ur, that later Abraham stayed away from such cities while his sidekick Lot fell in love with them and ended up living in a cave and raping his own daughters? By *calling* Abraham, God may have given Abraham the green light to act on what he had been thinking to do probably for a long time, but that does not mean that God predestined Abraham, that God decided for Abraham, and that Abraham did not have the freedom to disobey and decide to stay in Harran for the rest of his life or go back to Ur. Although God did tell Abraham to leave Harran, he does not tell Abraham where to go and God only told him that he had arrived where God wanted him to be only when Abraham camped between Ai and Bethel. Does it mean that God was guiding Abraham like a blind robot? Of course, that is how both fundamentalist and *critical* scholars read the story, but if that is the case, why did Abraham leave that place and went to Negev and eventually to Egypt if he did not have the freedom to go anywhere he wanted, even where obviously God did not think that it was a good place for him to be such as Egypt? That God did not want Abraham to go to Egypt and to do what he did there is made explicit by the text because God is presented as forcing the Egyptians to expel Abraham and his sidekick Lot from Egypt. Does it mean now that God is using the Egyptians as puppets in order to bring Abraham back on track? This is another fundamental difference between the roles played by deities in the reality of mythological stories and the reality of the biblical stories: While in mythological stories deities intervene to modify the reality

because it is not acceptable for the intended readers, in biblical stories the deity is presented as *causing* what happens naturally because the world has been created by God so that whenever the world behaves according to certain rules, it is because God had established not only the world, but those rules as well so that when the world follows its own rules, the ultimate cause of what happens is God himself. If the biblical author had been asked how come that all human societies that do not tolerate foreigners and engage in wars to conquer them always end up in ruins, the answer would have been that that is the way God deals with such people and the outcome is a punishment from God for being evil although God does not need to do anything to implement those punishments because the world, being created by a rational God, the laws by which it functions must also be rational so that ultimately the world itself behaves like a rational being. When a mechanism is built to behave in a certain way in certain circumstances, when the mechanism behaves according to the way it had been designed, it actually behaves rationally not in the sense that it has a rationality of its own, but it reflects the rationality of the engineer who built it. When a car performs in a certain way, is it not explained that it does so because the company that build it *caused* it to behave that way, and when a car fails to perform according to what is expected of it, is it not said that the *cause* of its failure is the manufacturer and the manufacturer is held accountable? Did God had to miraculously bring a pestilence over Egypt to expel foreigners like Abraham and Lot from Egypt or to bring down from the sky torches impregnated with bitumen to set a city like Sodom on fire? Why does God have to do something to cause *civilized* people like the Egyptians and the modern Americans and Europeans to hate foreigners since hating foreigners is the very basis of being *civilized*, and why does God have to do anything to make such societies dysfunctional when such societies can never be functional and harmonious? Does God cause societies that hate other human beings to suffer pestilences or social failures and end up in ruins? Of course, he does, and since we see all the time that those who do good prosper and those who do evil eventually end up in ruin, it follows not only that God created the world to function that way, but whenever the world functions according to the way God created it, he approvingly endorses those outcomes and claims responsibility. And if Abraham and Lot were expelled from Egypt because *civilized* people always blame foreigners for the evils that they suffer and they themselves cause, then why the biblical story tells that it was God who caused those sufferings? The obvious answer is that Abraham's going to Egypt was not approved by God and therefore his expulsion from Egypt was welcomed by God. True, God does not punish Abraham for doing what God did not like, and the reason God did not need to punish Abraham was because Abraham had already been punished by the Egyptians for being inconsistent by leaving the garden of Eden in Ur and then going back to another garden of Eden in Egypt, and the reason God does not punish Abraham is precisely because the biblical stories have the purpose to emphasize not only that humans have the freedom to use their rationality to make choices, but they

benefit from those choices or pay a price for them not based on the decisions of an arbitrary deity, but based on whether they use their rationality to make good choices or to make bad ones. By contrast, in mythology, deities intervene simply to provide an alternative explanation for something that happens naturally but the author knows that the intended readers would not like. As it is known, according to Greek mythology, the Trojan War was caused by the decision of the goddess Aphrodite who miraculously made Helen to fall in love with the Trojan Prince Paris to reward him for declaring her the winner of the beauty contest among the sexiest goddesses so that Helen ran away from Sparta with her lover Paris to Troy. Does a queen or a princess has to fall in love with a foreign king or prince in order to end up in another harem when queens and princesses regularly ended up in another harem when their own city had been conquered? If there is a natural way to explain events that follow a rule, why have gods manipulate events so that what happens becomes virtually unthinkable in the real world? If, however, a foreign prince like Paris managed to conquer a proud city like Sparta, that would be extremely humiliating for the Greek readers just as the successful attack of some Muslim hijackers on the skyscrapers in New York was humiliating for Americans and therefore an alternative explanation for the presence of Helen in Troy had to be provided, and since no reasonable explanation could be provided for Helen to choose on her own to go to Troy, a deity had to step in the story and provide a hocus-pocus. A similar situation occurs during the duel between Menelaus and Paris at the start of the Trojan War when the two armies were facing each other. After each warrior failed to bring down his opponent with the spear, Menelaus grabbed Paris and wrestled him to the ground, dragging him by the helmet so that the strap of the helmet would choke him and that would have put an end to the hostilities. To prevent this, according to the story, the same goddess Aphrodite snapped the strap of the helmet releasing Paris from the deadly grip so that at the end of the fight, it is not Paris that ends up dead, but is the Greek hero Menelaus who ends up wounded by an arrow. Why did Aphrodite had to snap the strap of the helmet and change the outcome of the fight when the strap could have snapped by itself since it was meant to be strong enough to keep the helmet in place and not to holt a body attached to a helmet while being dragged, and besides, if the strap had to be snapped in order to come loose, what prevented Paris from snapping the strap himself with his own hands when he realize that the strap was going to choke him without the deity to have to step in and provide a hocus-pocus? When we take into account, however, that this is a story meant to be read by Greek readers, to tell them that their own hero failed to bring down their enemy because the enemy was skilled enough to escape, such a course of events would cause readers to lose any appetite for reading, but when a god caused the failure of the Greek hero, the Greek readers would be even more interested to keep reading to find out how the Greek heroes and their gods eventually succeed even when they fought enemies helped by other gods. And when in the end of the story the Greek readers learn that the

Greek hero Menelaus went after the foreign prince Paris who had stolen his beautiful wife, he did not hesitate to face him in a duel, the Greek army eventually killed Paris, destroyed his city, and brought back the runaway wife, Greek readers feel extremely gratified for spending the time to read the story, but when the biblical readers read that Abraham, when he decided to go to Egypt, was so scared of being killed because an Egyptian Paris might take a liking at his beautiful Helen, he told her to tell Paris that she was his sister so that Paris would offer him a dish at the table among his servants in exchange for having fun with his wife, what pleasure can Hebrew readers find in reading a story that only Egyptians would enjoy? If Homer had written a story that a Greek king Menelaus of an obscure city Sparta decided to go with his beautiful wife Helen to live in Troy – which was the most famous city compared with which Sparta was a poor hamlet – but was afraid that a Trojan prince like Paris, who was a famous womanizer, whose interest and favors even the sexiest goddesses sought, might take a liking at his beautiful wife Hellen and upon finding out that she is married, he might decide to kill the husband to have sex with the wife, Menelaus decides to tell Hellen to tell Paris that she is his sister and not his wife so that Paris not only would be free to enjoy having sex with Helen, but would reward Menelaus with a free dish at the table of his servants, how interested would be Greek readers to read such a story? Why would an author write such a story for readers who look upon Abraham as their hero, indeed, as their inspiration and model? Was the author of Genesis an idiot not knowing how to write a story that his readers would enjoy reading? Since the Greek gods have no respect for the natural course of events and manipulate any outcome so that their own concern is to make the readers enjoy the reading, why does not the biblical God do the same?

At this point I imagine that some readers would be quick to point out that even the biblical deity is manipulative because we are told that he made Sarah barren so that the poor woman, desperate for having a child, gave his slave-girl to her husband to become a surrogate mother, and later, the same deity, made her fertile so that eventually she managed to have a son of her own whom she wanted so badly. But how do we know what God did to Sarah? Well, because the writer tells us so. But how did the writer know what God did to Sarah? Well, again, because Sarah told the writer or Sarah told others from whom the writer of Genesis learned so that he put in writing what Sarah said. And that bring us to the key questions: How did Sarah know not only that she was barren, but that her barrenness was caused by God and not because Abraham was infertile or she never had a child because did not attempt to have a child? For modern readers barrenness is something objective because it can be objectively established with fertility tests but for ancient readers, barrenness was an obvious example of subjectivity for which no one could know the cause, particularly when women who had not been able to have children for some time eventually were able to give birth. True, when Sarah

was asked by those who knew that she was married why she did not have any children, no doubt she explained that it was God who prevented her from having children and who could argue with God or challenge what she said and prove her wrong since fertility tests were not available? What else could she have said? That she was careful about having sex because she did not want to go through the trouble with pregnancies like the slaves and the ordinary people or that she was practicing abortions? And if she explained that it was God who made her barren, what else could the writer of the story say? That Sarah was lying and that he did not believe himself what he was writing about what Sarah said? When you assume that only intelligent people would read what you write, why say that you do not believe that Sarah was barren when only dumb people would conclude that a woman could be barren while she is young and becomes fertile only after she is past seventy years old? Why do you need a deity to produce a hocus-pocus when there is a commonsense explanation of events, particularly when you provide all the information to understand what happened? And the author of Genesis is quite explicit that if there was some changes and developments as to what happened to Sarah, it had nothing to do with changes that occurred to her private parts, but with changes that took place to her way of thinking. For instance, after Sarah manages to give birth to her own son, the conflict between the two ladies escalates and this time Hagar is expelled from home, obviously against her own will, therefore there is no *conflict* between the earlier passage when she ran away and was brought back and the one when she was sent away from home:

Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. ... The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son; *for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.*" The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son [emphasis mine] (Gen 21:2, 8–11).

This time, the reason for Sarah's action is no longer Hagar's supposed arrogance or that Ishmael was abusive with Isaac since the two brothers clearly were very happy together, but the "inheritance." In other words, since there was another brother, Isaac would not inherit as much as he would if he were the only child. More specifically, Isaac would inherit three times more if Ishmael were disinherited because in ancient times the firstborn child would inherit twice as much as any of the other sons, and since Isaac was the second son, he would inherit only a third of the whole property. Since this rule was widely used in the Middle East at that time – and no doubt even later and by other societies – it belonged to the reasoned reality and as everything that belongs to the reasoned reality, there must be a reason for adopting such rules. In ancient times there was no retirement, no social security systems, no pensions, and no nursing homes therefore, as the children grew, married, and established their own homes, the parents

remained with one of the sons who inherited also the share that belonged to the parents, inheritance that involved the responsibility to take care of the parents until they died and provided for the burial. The choice of the firstborn or the oldest son was also a no-brainer: The oldest son married first and therefore was ahead of the others in building his estate so that the parents usually enjoyed better living and security in the home of the oldest son than in the home of the youngest who was just starting out and struggling to make ends meet. Consequently, the rule had a rationale and when the parents adopted it, they used purely selfish reasons. In other societies, however, the rule was for the parents to remain with the youngest child, a rule that made more sense because the older children left the parental home as they married, and the parents remained with the youngest as the one who needed most the help that the parents provided. In ancient times, however, when people lived at the subsistence level and the prosperity depended very much on the inheritance, the double inheritance was a tremendous incentive for children to assume the responsibility of caring for their parents in spite of the fact that this privilege triggered bitter competitions among siblings who viewed it as an unfair privilege as we will see later. For Sarah, however, the rule of inheritance presented a problem no so much because the older son received a double share, but because she would end up living not with her own son, but with an adopted son and his mother so that in the new home the master would be the son of a woman whom he knew that she was his real mother and whom Sarah had mistreated as she no doubt did with all the other slaves since she obviously was a very abusive woman, something that no feminist would ever see in these *patriarchal* stories. Although Ishmael shows no signs that he thinks in terms of a pyramid in which he would be boss because he is the firstborn, we need to remember that Sarah grew up in a family that believed in the Tower of Babel according to which you are *blessed* only when you are at the top and the others are serving you, and so far, she has been at the top so that even her husband did everything that she wanted and even the rulers were courting and vying to get in bed with her, but the inheritance would be the moment when her Tower of Babel falls apart when she would no longer be on top because on top would be now a *slave* woman with whom she had been fighting, and that is the reason she refers to Ishmael not using his name or claim him as her son, but rather as “the son of the salve woman.” She realizes that the household – including Abraham and even God – would no longer speak *her* language, but the language of a son who no doubt would speak the language of the lady who had been her slave and with whom she had fought the whole life to keep under her foot. This issue of inheritance may provide a clue about what the supposed arrogance of Hagar may have consisted in. When Sarah not only kept treating Hagar as a slave but no doubt even abused her after she became pregnant because Sarah became jealous on her, probably Hagar reminded Sarah that she was now not only a secondary wife and no longer a slave, but she was pregnant with the child who one day would be the master of everything and everyone in the household – including

of Sarah herself – and the future master would not appreciate that he and his real mother had been treated as slaves. In other words, Hagar invited Sarah to use common sense, but obviously, Sarah took the appeal to common sense as a great insult and treated Hagar accordingly. Sarah may have punished Hagar for daring to tell her what her own common sense could have told her if she had had any, but the punishment did not invalidate Hagar's point and no doubt it was that truth that caused Sarah to start thinking about having her own child. Although she eventually did give birth to a child, now she realized that the problem that Hagar faced her with did not go away since Ishmael was legally the firstborn who would still inherit not only two thirds of the property, but Sarah and Abraham – including Hagar – would end up living with Ishmael and not with Isaac who would have to establish a family of his own and live by himself, therefore Sarah decides that the real solution would be to disinherit Ishmael altogether and expel him with his mother from home. At this point Abraham found himself in a real difficulty because he had to send away from home not only one of his wives, but his firstborn son with whom he was supposed to live for the rest of his life and therefore he took the matter to God: "But God said to Abraham, 'Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you'" (Gen 21:12). A feminist scholar cannot miss the opportunity to applaud this patriarchal God who sides with the abusive woman who according to feminists was so abused by her husband:

Abraham greatly disapproves, for his son Ishmael's sake, but again *the voice of Sarah, the matriarch, and the voice of God are one*. Abraham's wishes in the matter of inheritance are unimportant and misguided, as Isaac's wishes will be once he has sons.

This passage is a difficult one in biblical ethics. Abraham cares not at all about the maid he has bedded, and Sarah is contemptuous of mother and child and would expose them to death. The author works hard to rationalize and justify the emotions and actions of Abraham and Sarah (21:12–13). Yet while reading this story, one has the distinct feeling it is being told from Hagar and Ishmael's point of view [emphasis mine].³

Why is this passage "difficult" in "biblical ethics"? Because both fundamentalist and *critical* scholars – including feminists – understand "biblical ethics" that whatever biblical characters like Abraham and Sarah do must be models of behaviors instituted by God and when they engage in behaviors that are blatantly outrageous scholars and theologians must use all kinds of rationalizations to justify them because they equate those behaviors with "biblical ethics"? And is the author the one who "works hard to rationalize and justify" the actions of Abraham and Sarah when it is obvious that the story is told from the point of view of Hagar and Ishmael, or is the *feminist* scholar who

³ Susan Niditch, "Hagar: Mothering a Hero (Gen. 16; 21)," in *Women's Bible Commentary*, 3rd ed., rev. and updated (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012):35.

is working hard to justify the behavior of an abusive woman whom she calls a “matriarch” and identifies her voice with the very voice of God? What if the biblical author is telling this story from the point of view of the abused precisely in order to show that the abusers not only do not end up *blessed* and happy, but actually in ruin? And if there is some “biblical ethics” that these biblical stories try to establish, what is so difficult about these “ethics” if such ethics presuppose that the abusers in the long run do not benefit from their abuses but actually they end up paying for what they had done to others and God makes sure that that happens even if the abusers are supposed to be his favorites, taking into account that to be God’s favorite is to be held accountable to higher standards for doing what is wrong? Of course, God *approved* of Sarah’s decision because when two ladies are fighting, the best and only way to solve the conflict is to separate the two. We do not know how Abraham talked to God but Abraham did not need to ask God what to do under such circumstances because he had proved before that he knew very well what to do when he came in conflict with Lot: he told him to separate since he did not want conflict. Why did he need to ask God what to do when he knew very well and why did God have to oblige to tell him what Abraham knew very well? Does not this God have more important things to deal within this vast universe? While the pagan gods have no problem to talk to humans, the biblical God is different not only because is the only one, but is not speaking with humans. Therefore, an ancient reader would not have been so stupid as to equate all this God-talk in the text with God himself as both fundamentalist and *critical* scholars do. Although we are told on some occasions that God talked to Abraham and even to strangers, no detail is provided as to how such encounters took place. Did Abraham actually hear a voice out of the thin air talking to him, or did he perceive in his own mind that that was what God expected from him to do? Because, if that is the case, then all he had to do was just to use his rationality as God’s image in him, and whenever he decided to do something rationally, then he perceived that that was what God himself was actually telling him to do. Although we are not told that when the conflict occurred between him and Lot God told Abraham what to do and Abraham did not feel the need to ask God what to do, in the case of the conflict between the two ladies we are told that God encouraged him to follow the same commonsense that he had used before. Why did he need this *encouragement* now? May be because this was a conflict that did not involve him directly since it was a fight between two women whom he equally cherished. The difficulty of the biblical author is that he has to provide an explanation about the world in which his readers live that had been created by a rational God, who is the only one, who cannot talk directly to human beings and does not need to talk because he had created them with the same rationality as his own and therefore they can figure out what is best for themselves and what God expects from them, but at the same time this God is not indifferent about what humans choose to do and whether they use their rationality the right way or not and therefore, has to find some ways to present what God thinks

without assuming an explicit presence of God. As we remember, in the story about Sodom, the author uses three travelers as representatives of God. When the three travelers showed up, there is no suggestion that Abraham thought that they were more than mere human beings who needed the kind of accommodation that Abraham would provide for any traveler. It is only when the three strangers open up the subject of Sodom that they are identified with “the Lord”: “The LORD [יהוה, *yhwh*] said, ‘Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him?’ ... Then the LORD said, ‘How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin!’” (Gen 18:17–18, 20). Was YHWH one of those three travelers – and if that is the case, how come that he needed food and foot washing and Abraham could talk to him – or was what one of those travelers said what God himself was thinking and wanted to find out so that it was Abraham who identified the speaker with what God himself was thinking and wanted to find out? If there was an outcry about how Sodom treated foreigners, who else could have complained but foreigners who had been mistreated there, and if these foreigners were heading for Sodom and had heard about those complaints, what is so strange that they voiced their concern about what they might experience in Sodom and will have the opportunity to find out firsthand whether those complaints were founded or not, particularly after they had been treated so lavishly by Abraham? True, the author identifies God as the cause of Sarah’s barrenness and now God is identified with three travelers, but the author does not expect the readers to be such idiots to take such statements as declarations of God himself – as both fundamentalist and *critical* scholars do – but understand not only that God is not identical with those statements, but the readers should use judgment to figure out which such statements might be in harmony with what God thinks and which ones are not only different, but quite opposite of what God thinks. That what foreigners think of Sodom must be what God himself thinks is a matter of common sense therefore the author finds no difficulty in identifying the three travelers with YHWH, while when the author says that Sarah’s barrenness was actually caused by God when God had explicitly promised Abraham offspring so numerous that it would fill the earth, to make the same God cause Sarah to be barren and prevent her from having children is to make such a God an idiot. What is so difficult to establish as a reader which statements must represent what God thinks and which ones are used by different characters in the story as rationalizations for human decisions and actions that cannot be justified rationally?

We noticed that Abraham is able to talk to God anytime he wanted as if God was part of his household, and that is understandable since Abraham is presented as having a close relationship with God, but sometimes God has to inform people about his displeasure, people who do not have any relationship with God, and in such situations the author resorts to other means of communication than direct talk. When Sarah was taken as a

concubine by the ruler of Egypt, God communicated his displeasure by sending a pestilence upon Egypt and somehow the Egyptian ruler was able to figure out that the pestilence was a message sent by this God of Abraham – about whom he had no idea – that he did not want Sarah to be in his bed and he promptly corrected his mistake, while when Abimelech did the same thing with Sarah, God made known his displeasure by means of a dream. Since people have all kinds of dreams all the time and some of the dreams are the result of their wishful thinking, does it mean that all this dream-talk should be taken as real pronouncements of God? Just as in the case of Sarah's barrenness, how do we know that those dreams did take place and were not pretended, and if the dreams did take place, that the one who talked in those dreams was really God and not a figment of the imagination of the one who was asleep? Again, the reader is expected to use judgment and common sense and discern what must be in harmony with what God thinks and does and what are just claims by humans that the deity endorsed their actions that they cannot justify rationally. A rare procedure of communicating divine message is by using angels and we find one instance when Hagar ran away from home when she was abused by Sarah:

The angel of the LORD [מַלְאָכִי הַיְהוָה, *mal ak yhwah*] found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. And he said, "Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" She said, "I am running away from my mistress Sarai." The angel of the LORD said to her, "Return to your mistress, and submit to her." The angel of the LORD also said to her, "I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude." And the angel of the LORD said to her, "Now you have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the LORD has given heed to your affliction. He shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him; and he shall live at odds with all his kin" (Gen 16:7–12).

Of course, both fundamentalist and *critical* scholars assume that this angel was a supernatural being with wings who came to Hagar to persuade her to return to Abraham because Ishmael had been predestined to be evil – or a terrorist as would be called today – and God wanted these terrorists to multiply and not disappear by starving to death in that desert. Although the text does say that the messenger was *of YHWH*, the words "messenger/*mal ak*" is used regularly to refer to human beings and therefore this messenger did not have to be a supernatural being in order to be *of YHWH* because any messenger that Abraham sent to bring Hagar back could have been *of YHWH* in the sense that he not only presented God's point of view, but argued with Hagar presenting what he was saying as representing God's point of view. Indeed, the best argument that a messenger sent by Abraham to bring Hagar back could use to persuade Hagar to return home was to remind Hagar about the promise that God had made to Abraham that he would greatly increase Abraham's offspring, and since at this point the only offspring that Abraham had was the unborn baby, that promise applied

to Ishmael as long as Hagar remained Abraham's official wife and Ishmael his official son. To this argument, Hagar must have replied that if it was true that she and her son were so special to God, how come that she and her son were treated like a wild ass while an ass is doing the hard work of carrying burdens and deserved at least protection and care and not beating. To this objection, the messenger must have replied that if Sarah was so irrational as to treat an animal so gentle and hardworking as a donkey just as she would tread a wild beast that is dangerous and you want to get rid of, even a gentle animal like a donkey is able to kick back and the abuser suffers the consequences of her abuses and that is not just the point of view of a human messenger, but of God himself. And at this point I imagine that both fundamentalist and *critical* scholars jump through the roof that what the text says is that God knew that the son who was going to be born was evil because he was born from the wrong woman and the kicking of the donkey was not due to the fact that it was abused, but it was the result of the fact that the donkey was evil and kept kicking people for no reason because that is what wild donkeys do, just try to hurt people all the time who do not cause them any harm. What ancient readers would have found hilarious about this explanation is precisely because donkeys, even wild ones if they still existed, were some of the most unaggressive animals because they were not equipped with horns, with fangs, with claws, with venom, or any other means of harming anyone. Their only body part that they can use to hurt is their back hooves, but they can use it only in self-defense and even that is not very efficient since what they kick is behind them and therefore they cannot be very accurate with their blows. True, Sarah was treating Hagar as she would treat a wild ass, but if even a wild ass can kick back, how can Hagar kick back since no one, even God himself, could question what Sarah did or decided, let alone hold her accountable? How could the messenger claim that God was going to bless her and her son and establish justice in the fight between the two women? As we have seen so often, the messenger would have replied that since the world in which we live is created by a rational God, it is God who would make sure that Sarah gets back what she had been giving to others because ultimately, the world and the way in which it functions behaves like a rational being. Of course, the writer expects the reader to keep this in mind and see what the *lot* of Sarah and her descendants will be just as the readers by now know what the *lot* of Lot ended up to be.

The pattern that we will see up to the end of Genesis is that the fight between ladies is taken over and carried on through their sons, and the reason women want sons is precisely in order to carry on their fights and not to please their abusive husbands as feminists fantasize. About Ishmael, we read: "God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt" (Gen 21:20–21). That God was with the boy in the sense that God made sure that the boy

survived is understandable, but does it mean that the boy became an “expert with the bow” because God told him so or was it because his mother brought him up practicing with the bow in order to use it to “kick back” at the woman who had been treating her like a wild ass? And Hagar, being Egyptian herself, got a wife for Ishmael from Egypt because she wanted to make sure that Ishmael’s descendants would have mothers just like herself and therefore would carry on her legacy of “kicking back” over generations. Not only Hagar made sure that Ishmael got a wife just like herself, but we learn that Abraham himself made sure that Isaac also got a wife just like his mom:

Now Abraham was old, well advanced in years; and the LORD had blessed Abraham in all things. Abraham said to his servant, the oldest of his house, who had charge of all that he had, “Put your hand under my thigh and I will make you swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and earth, that you will not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I live, but will go to my country and to my kindred and get a wife for my son Isaac” (Gen 24:1–4).

At this point I imagine that both fundamentalist and *critical* scholars jump through the roof that Isaac had to marry a woman from the relatives of his parents because they were the only ones who had the faith and the ideas that God wanted to become universal for the whole world and that is the reason God miraculously guided the process of finding Isaac’s wife because God knew that only such a woman would be able to give birth and raise the kind of children that God had promised to Abraham and become the only ones who inhabit the earth. But what was *miraculous* about how Rebekah was found? Since Abraham had decided that Isaac could only marry a woman who came from the same family from where he got his own wife, what is so miraculous about the fact that the match-maker entrusted with the mission to find such a woman, returned with a replica of Sarah to the extent that Rebekah not only was now the undisputed beauty queen of the Middle East, but she was both barren and fertile at the same time? And I imagine that both fundamentalist and *critical* scholars point out that God answered the prayer of the match-maker by making sure that the match-maker asked exactly for the signs that would match Rebekah and that proves that whatever these women do is exactly what God wants, but what is *miraculous* about the fact that the match-maker was asked by Abraham to take a solemn vow to go where Rebekah lived and nowhere else, that the match-maker prayed to find the bride when he arrived at the place where he was told to go and never prayed in any other places, that the supposed *right* young woman would do what young women always did at that time? Were there any other young ladies at the marriageable age in that house at that time or were there other ladies in other cities who would have done the same thing? Just because the match-maker discovered that things happened exactly as he had imagined because he had seen it happen all the time does not mean that God manipulated anything. An intelligent reader would not conclude that Rebekah was predestined by

God to be Isaac's wife because she was the one that God knew that she would do only what God wanted because Abraham's match-maker was able to anticipate her behavior, but would try to figure out what God intended by comparing what God had explicitly said that he expected Abraham's descendants to do and what Abraham descendants actually did guided by their mothers. If in order for Abraham's descendants to fulfill Abraham's dreams of establishing a world without violence it was important for them to have a mother who had the right mentality, what was so right about Sarah's mentality and that of Sarah's family on whom Abraham turned his back precisely because he wanted to live a different kind of life? Since the mentality of the children was inherited from their mothers, what was the point in turning your back on the mentality of the mothers if you keep carrying those mothers with you? It is as if you want Christian ministers to be well equipped to promote the Christian faith but keep sending them to be taught in divinity schools where professors are disguised atheists at best if not downright anti-Christians. If God liked so much Sarah's mentality, what did he like about it? The fact that she had to be on top, that she should have a favorite child who would be *blessed* and all the others should be his servants? If Abraham did not like the Tower of Babel with a name/Shem at the top and he wanted to establish a different kind of thinking that would be inherited by his descendants and eventually be adopted by the whole world, why did he go back to the descendants of the failed Tower of Babel in order to get a wife for his only son whom he decided to keep? Yes, Abraham may have understood that violence is the main source of irrationality in the world, but it is becoming apparent that there were other things on which he remained terrible confused, and it included the idea that there should be a Tower of Babel with one of his descendant at the top and he realized that this mentality could only be preserved and passed down to the next generations by making sure that his chosen descendant should marry a woman who had been brought up with that mentality. And boy, was Rebekah a true replica of Sarah!

Before turning to Rebekah, however, now that we know what was the *lot* of Lot, let us find out what was the *lot* of Sarah and Abraham, that is, how they ended their lives: "Abraham gave all he had to Isaac. But to the sons of his concubines Abraham gave gifts, while he was still living, and he sent them away from his son Isaac, eastward to the east country" (Gen 25:5–6). Since to the west is the sea, Abraham could not have sent his unwanted sons to the west. So, Abraham and Sarah made sure that all their wealth remained with their chosen son so that they actually kept it for themselves for the rest of their lives just as Sarah had decided. One would expect the final *lot* of all humans to be a hole in the ground but about the *end* of Sarah we read:

Sarah lived one hundred twenty-seven years; this was the length of Sarah's life. And Sarah died at Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan; and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her. Abraham rose up

from beside his dead, and said to the Hittites, "I am a stranger and an alien residing among you; give me property among you for a burying place, so that I may bury my dead out of my sight" (Gen 23:1–4).

Abraham may have been a "stranger" or a foreigner, but why did he have to ask the locals to give him a *lot* as a piece of property to bury his dead wife? What was he supposed to do with her, keep carrying her on a stretcher because the locals would not allow him to dig a hole somewhere in the ground and bury her? That the locals were not so absurd is made clear by their reply: "The Hittites answered Abraham, 'Hear us, my lord; you are a mighty prince among us. Bury your dead in the choicest of our burial places; none of us will withhold from you any burial ground for burying your dead'" (Gen 23:5–6). That *civilized* people cannot tolerate foreigners to live among them while they are alive is understandable, but even the most xenophobic people apparently have no objections to tolerate foreigners as long as they are dead because even dead *civilized* people can live with dead foreigners. Foreigners may be stinky when they are alive, but they become even more stinky – and literally – when they are dead so that even the most *civilized* countries would offer a foreigner the privilege of enjoying a hole in the ground. Abraham, however, is not satisfied just with a place in the ground where his wife would rot, because for such a special person he wants a *lot* that is really special, and he explains what kind of place would be an appropriate residence for the body of his special wife:

He said to them, "If you are willing that I should bury my dead out of my sight, hear me, and entreat for me Ephron son of Zohar, so that he may give me the cave of Machpelah, which he owns; it is at the end of his field. For the full price let him give it to me in your presence as a possession for a burying place." Now Ephron was sitting among the Hittites; and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the hearing of the Hittites, of all who went in at the gate of his city, "No, my lord, hear me; I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it; in the presence of my people I give it to you; bury your dead" (Gen 8–11)

Consequently, Abraham did not want his special wife to end up in a hole in the ground, but wanted her to end up in a cave. In a *cave*? When did we learn that someone ended up in a cave? Does it ring a bell? And although the locals have no objection to allow a foreigner to bury his dead wife in a cave since no one could use caves for anything anyway and that is the reason only animals lived in caves, Abraham is not satisfied because he wants to *own* the cave and is even willing to pay the price no matter how high:

Then Abraham bowed down before the people of the land. He said to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land, "If you only will listen to me! I will give the price of the field; accept it from me, so that I may bury my dead there." Ephron answered Abraham, "My lord, listen to me; a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver – what is that between you and me? Bury your dead." Abraham agreed with Ephron; and Abraham weighed out for Ephron the silver that he had

named in the hearing of the Hittites, four hundred shekels of silver, according to the weights current among the merchants. So the field of Ephron in Machpelah, which was to the east of Mamre, the field with the cave that was in it and all the trees that were in the field, throughout its whole area, passed to Abraham as a possession in the presence of the Hittites, in the presence of all who went in at the gate of his city (Gen 23:8, 12–18).

Why would Abraham want to buy a piece of land such as a cave that was completely useless while he never bothered to buy any useful piece of land? While Lot apparently got his cave for free, Abraham had to pay for it, and quite a hefty price! According to scholars, a possible meaning for the word Machpelah is “the portion” or the *lot*. As with all questions that an intelligent reader is expected to raise about the text, the author eventually provides the answer as to why Abraham wanted Sarah to end up in a cave: “Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people. His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hittite, east of Mamre, the field that Abraham purchased from the Hittites. There Abraham was buried, with his wife Sarah” (Gen 25:8–10). Consequently, the reason Abraham wanted to own the cave and was willing to pay a hefty price was that he wanted to make sure that he himself would end up in the same cave with his wife. When Abraham and Sarah said their vows at their wedding and the priest recited “until death do us part,” Abraham no doubt corrected him by saying “until even death cannot do as part.” Lot may have ended up in a cave sooner because he loved cities more than Abraham did, but Abraham eventually ended up in a cave himself, and he ended up in the cave because his whole life followed blindly his wife who always carried with herself the Tower of Babel and the city that she had left behind. If Abraham left Harran because he wanted to live a different kind of life that his descendants not only would inherit, but would pass on to their descendants and eventually the whole world would adopt, what was so special about Ishmael and Isaac? That they could not see eye to eye because of their mothers although they were brothers and had absolutely no reason to hate each other? If that is what God wanted the whole world to learn and to adopt by calling Abraham, what could the world learn from Ishmael and Isaac that the world had not known from all times?

In order to make sure that his descendants would treat each other like Ishmael and Isaac, Abraham made arrangements that his descendant Isaac would marry a copycat of his wife and would do the same, or may be worse. We do not know whether Isaac missed Abraham when Abraham died, but apparently he missed very much his mom because, when he met Rebekah, we read: “Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah’s tent. He took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother’s death” (Gen 24:67). Although Abraham was still alive and apparently lived in that tent while Sarah was enjoying an expensive cave, the tent was still “Sarah’s tent” and the grown-up baby was now consoled because he had a new

mom who was just like the previous one. One would expect Abraham's special son to distinguish himself somehow, but what distinguishes Isaac is that he is completely unremarkable. Instead, the stories emphasize how remarkable his wife was, and what made Rebekah remarkable was precisely that she did exactly what her mother in law and aunt did to the extent that she herself was about to end up in bed with the same Abimelech because just like her mother-in-law denied her marital relationship with her husband and managed not to have children blaming God for having made her *barren* only in the end to manage not only to give birth, but to give birth to twins. While Sarah proved to be fertile after having been barren, Rebekah managed to be super fertile after having been barren. True, Rebekah did not have to fight with another woman over children, and the reason she did not have to fight with another woman was because fighting was right in her belly because about her pregnancy we read:

Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. The children struggled together within her; and she said, "If it is to be this way, why do I live?" So she went to inquire of the LORD. And the LORD said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger." When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them (Gen 25:21–26).

Poor woman! God called Abraham because God wanted to bless the whole world with descendants like those of Abraham, and now God put two of those descendants into Rebekah's womb and they were so eager to fight with each other that did not have enough patience to wait to be born and to grow first so that they started to fight while still in the womb to build their muscles and fists! That those two fetuses were caused by God to fight with one another while still in their mother's womb is explained even by an authoritative modern commentary:

At the same time, these texts witness to a *God who engages this family* in the very midst of its conflicted life from the start. In fact, God's oracle to Rebekah (25:23) stands at the beginning. While the oracle presents a divine interpretation of already existing conditions, and the characters do inherit a way of being a family from their Abrahamic forebears, in some sense *it becomes God's own word that generates and intensifies the conflict*. The entire story involves a *divine decision to elect one person* rather than another to carry on the Abrahamic line of promise. At its most profound level, the problems and possibilities created by the divine election constitute the essence of the conflict in the story of Jacob and Esau. *We*

should understand the conflicted relationships in the story as a result of God's decision to choose one family [emphasis mine].⁴

Although God chose Jacob to be his favorite before he was born and could have caused him to be born first so that there would have been no conflict in the family, God not only caused his favorite to come out of the womb second to fight with his brothers for the privileges, but caused them to fight with one another while still in their mother's womb no doubt because without such fights the Bible would have been so boring that no one would have bothered to read. According to the way both fundamentalist and *critical* scholars read this story, this God must be quite an idiot, if not a downright demon. An intelligent reader, however, would suspect that if the two brothers ended up fighting each other, it may not have to do with what they were doing while they were cramped in their mother's womb, but with what their parents put into their heads. And that is precisely what the author explains in the stories that follow. And the conflict between the two brothers had to do ... surprise, surprise, ... with inheritance. We learn that one-day Esau came to his brother being very hungry and exhausted:

Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob. Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!" (Therefore he was called Edom.) Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright (Gen 25:28–34).

Of course, both fundamentalist and *critical* scholars take this statement that Esau "despised his birthright" as proof that Esau was evil and was hated by God while Jacob, because he valued so much that birthright, is proof that he was good and God appreciated and blessed him because God wanted the whole world to become like Jacob and not like Esau. But why was Esau so evil because he did not value his birthright and why was Jacob so good that he would prefer to see his brother starve to death rather than offer him some food that he obviously had? If someone finds an enemy who is starving and refuses to offer some food, would that not be considered outrageous if not a crime? What is the difference between what Jacob did and a gangster who robs someone at gunpoint? Is it that a gangster would always rob strangers while Jacob did it to his own brother? If that is the kind of people God wanted to bless the world with through Abraham's descendants, then why would anyone want to live in such a world? If the two brothers were twins, how come that Jacob valued that birthright so much? As with all these *fights* in Genesis, we need to look for the lady, and the author is quite

⁴ *The New Interpreter's Bible: General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for Each Book of the Bible, Including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 1:518.

explicit about this: “When Esau was forty years old, he married Judith daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and Basemath daughter of Elon the Hittite; and they made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah” (Gen 25:34–35). Since Esau was considered the firstborn, he was entitled to a double share of the inheritance that implied that his parents would live with him for the rest of their lives. Since Isaac did not dislike Esau since he considered him his favorite son, there is no reason to suppose that he disliked his wives either and had any objections to live with them for the rest of his life. Therefore, if living with Esau and his wives seemed “bitter,” it must have seemed so to Rebekah. Just as we are not told how Hagar was arrogant with Sarah, we are not told what Esau’s wives did to Rebekah to make her life “bitter,” but is not difficult to figure out. Just like Sarah, Rebekah was the boss, and in Esau’s home, she found it difficult to be boss over the wives of the boss. Of course, both fundamentalist and *critical* scholars understand that life for Rebekah was “bitter” because those women were evil since they were Hittite just as Hagar was evil because she was Egyptian and Esau was evil because he despised his birthright, but an intelligent reader would understand that it was not Esau who despised the birthright; it was rather Rebekah who disliked the idea of living with Esau because she felt that Esau was too independent while Jacob proved to be mom’s boy who would always cling to his mom’s skirt and was the one with whom the mom wanted to live for the rest of her life because her good boy would never dare to question whatever his mom tells him no matter how old he may be. The problem was that technically Esau was the firstborn and if Jacob managed to find a way to deprive Esau of that birthright, it must have been his mom who was the inspiration because in that case the mom would end up living with her good boy and no doubt, a wife of her choosing. That his mom was inspiring him and Jacob diligently followed whatever she told him the text makes explicit when Jacob had to steal from Esau another thing, the *blessing*, which apparently was another privilege that came with being the firstborn. We do not know that Abraham ever blessed Isaac or any of his sons, but this ideas of *blessings* sends us back to the drunkard Noah and the Tower of Babel with the name/Shem at the top from where Rebekah’s family emigrated to Harran. This time, Jacob explicitly acts as a puppet of his mom:

When Isaac was old and his eyes were dim so that he could not see, he called his elder son Esau and said to him, “My son”; and he answered, “Here I am.” He said, “See, I am old; I do not know the day of my death. Now then, take your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field, and hunt game for me. Then prepare for me savory food, such as I like, and bring it to me to eat, so that I may bless you before I die.” Now Rebekah was listening when Isaac spoke to his son Esau. So when Esau went to the field to hunt for game and bring it, Rebekah said to her son Jacob, “I heard your father say to your brother Esau, ‘Bring me game, and prepare for me savory food to eat, that I may bless you before the LORD before I die.’ Now therefore, my son, obey my word as I command you. Go to the flock, and get me two choice kids, so that I may prepare from them savory food for your father, such as he likes; and you shall take it to

your father to eat, so that he may bless you before he dies." But Jacob said to his mother Rebekah, "Look, my brother Esau is a hairy man, and I am a man of smooth skin. Perhaps my father will feel me, and I shall seem to be mocking him, and bring a curse on myself and not a blessing." His mother said to him, "Let your curse be on me, my son; only obey my word, and go, get them for me" (Gen 27:1–13).

At this point I imagine that both fundamentalist and *critical* scholars would jump through the roof asking what is wrong with being *blessed*? If Noah blessed his son name/Shem and cursed Ham and his son Canaan and God had to do whatever Noah had decided, scholars justify by claiming that Ham was evil because he did not walk with his eyes closed or walked backwards all the time as Shem and Japheth did when they covered their naked drunkard father, and Canaan was himself evil and deserved to be cursed since he chose to be born from an evil father like Ham and not from a good one like Shem, but when a blessing is obtained by fraud, what justification can be for God to blindly implement such a decision? It is obvious that both fundamentalist and *critical* scholars imagine that these *blessings* are some kind of material objects such as a sum of money; once you have it, it is yours to keep for the rest of your life. What makes this understanding hilarious is that the blessings themselves are not actually delivered by the person who is doing the blessing himself, but they are delivered by God so that stealing a blessing is not like a bandit who steals the purse that someone carries, but rather like a bandit who steals the bank account and then goes to the bank to claim the money and the bank manager delivers the money although the manager has the proof that is giving the money to a thief. If a bank manager did that, anyone would think that the bank is run by an idiot, and that is precisely what both fundamentalist and *critical* scholars think of God: that he is an idiot who automatically does what a senile person like Isaac says even when he is unaware of what he is saying. Of course, scholars would reply that since the text explicitly says that that God blessed Rebekah and Jacob for their scheme, they have to remain faithful to the text and say what the text says, but an ancient intelligent reader would have asked precisely the question of what exactly does the text say about how Rebekah and Jacob were *blessed* and Esau was *un-blessed*? In other words, ancient readers would have looked at how the same text explains those *blessings* and *curses* and then would conclude what exactly God did. For instance, when Esau found out that Jacob had *stolen* his blessing, he asked his father to bless him as well; after all, if God is a lackey who automatically executes whatever Isaac says, what prevents Jacob from telling God to offer to Esau whatever Esau wanted? Eventually Isaac offered Esau the following *blessing*:

Esau said to his father, "Have you only one blessing, father? Bless me, me also, father!" And Esau lifted up his voice and wept. Then his father Isaac answered him: "See, away from the fatness of the earth shall your home be, and away from the dew of heaven on high. By your sword you shall live, and you shall serve

your brother; but when you break loose, you shall break his yoke from your neck" (Gen 27:38–40).

Is that what a father wants for his twin sons that one of them put a yoke on the neck of the other who eventually manages to break that yoke with the sword? If that is the kind of world that God wanted to establish through Abraham's descendants, can anyone imagine a more demonic world? Why did God need Abraham and his descendants; has not the world been always like that? And I imagine that both fundamentalist and *critical* scholars would reply that these *blessings* and *curses* or *un-blessings* only said what God himself wanted and was going to do because God is sovereign. As far as how God blessed Rebekah and Jacob, we read:

Now Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him, and Esau said to himself, "The days of mourning for my father are approaching; then I will kill my brother Jacob." But the words of her elder son Esau were told to Rebekah; so she sent and called her younger son Jacob and said to him, "Your brother Esau is consoling himself by planning to kill you. Now therefore, my son, obey my voice; flee at once to my brother Laban in Haran, and stay with him a while, until your brother's fury turns away – until your brother's anger against you turns away, and he forgets what you have done to him; then I will send, and bring you back from there. Why should I lose both of you in one day?" (Gen 27:41–45).

Rebekah was quite a smart lady, wasn't she? The reason she wanted Jacob to get the birthright was because she did not want to live with Esau and his wives and instead she preferred to live with her good boy Jacob who would inherit a double portion of the estate, but in the end, she discovered that she could not live with any of his sons so that she lost both. She could not live with Esau because she could not get along with her daughters-in-law and now even Esau would not tolerate her since he knew that Rebekah was behind the scheme, and on the other hand she had to send into exile her good boy with whom she hoped to spend the rest of her life because Esau had to use that sword to break the yoke that Jacob wanted to put on his neck. Rebekah may have thought that her good boy would live for a short time with that good family of saints of her brother Laban back home in Haran, but she never saw Jacob again. Although Isaac had hoped to live with Esau, when his bossy wife told him that she liked Jacob and wanted him to marry one of the saintly ladies like herself from her family in Haran, as a good boy obedient to her mom's replica, Isaac himself promptly discovered that he no longer liked Esau and his wives and told Jacob to do what the boss had decided:

Then Rebekah said to Isaac, "I am weary of my life because of the Hittite women. If Jacob marries one of the Hittite women such as these, one of the women of the land, what good will my life be to me?" Then Isaac called Jacob and blessed him, and charged him, "You shall not marry one of the Canaanite women. Go at once to Paddan-aram to the house of Bethuel, your mother's father; and take as wife from there one of the daughters of Laban, your mother's brother. May God

Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and numerous, that you may become a company of peoples. May he give to you the blessing of Abraham, to you and to your offspring with you, so that you may take possession of the land where you now live as an alien – land that God gave to Abraham” (Gen 27:46–28:5).

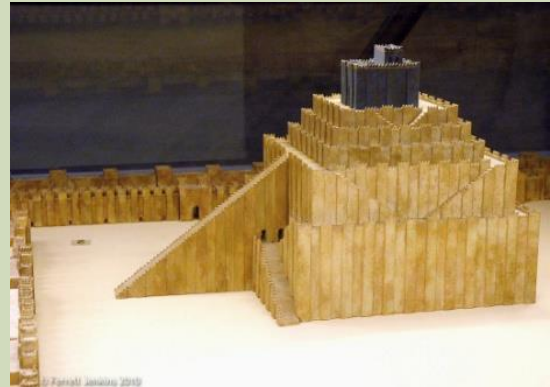
And I imagine that both fundamentalist and *critical* scholars would argue that all this was God’s plan to *bless* Jacob because God himself confirmed to Jacob in a dream that he would do what Isaac had decided when Jacob was on the run:

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the LORD stood beside him and said, “I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, “Surely the LORD is in this place – and I did not know it!” And he was afraid, and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven” (Gen 28:10–17).

Quite a blessing! That birthright and the double inheritance turned out to be the right to run away from home with only a stick in his hand and sleeping in the open like wild animals with only a stone as a pillow! If God was promising Jacob the land on which he was sleeping, why did he have to run away from it? I know, scholars would argue that Jacob had to run away from home to get those saintly wives like Rebekah and Sarah from whom he would get that wonderful offspring so that “all the families of the earth” would be blessed through that “offspring.” So far, the only “offspring” that Abraham has had were only brothers who tried to put a yoke on the neck of the other brother even when they were twins, but before we find out how saintly Jacob’s future wives are and particularly his offspring, we need to clarify what this dream is all about.

According to how scholars translate it, Jacob saw a “ladder” somehow hanging in the air and some divine beings going up and down on it, but that would have made no sense to an ancient reader since a ladder has to lean against a wall for anyone to be able to climb on it, and since there was only empty space there, a ladder staying upright would have made no sense whatsoever. Therefore, what Jacob must have seen was a *ziggurat*, that is, the kind of structure that the Tower of Babel referred to and had an impressive stairway that led to the top where the monarch was crowned and on which

priests and royal servants were climbing up and down. According to how archaeologists have reconstructed the structure, the Tower of Babel looked like this:⁵



Since this is what Jacob must have seen in the dream, he may have felt that at that moment he may have been a homeless fugitive at the bottom of the world, but one day he would be at the top, that is, would be that name/Shem that the drunkard Noah had blessed to be on top of the Tower of Babel and all would serve him. That what Jacob saw in the dream was a ziggurat or a Tower of Babel is confirmed by the symbol that he set up as a reminder of this supposed promise that God made to him:

Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one tenth to you” (Gen 18:20–22).

Such stones are known from ancient times as obelisks, and are found even in modern cities to represent the pyramid of power that control that place where the obelisk is erected, and the most impressive is the one in Washington, D.C., that is touted as the tallest stone structure in the world. Whenever an army conquered a place, the conquering power erected an obelisk as a reminder for the locals that now they were under the control of a foreign power. Although at this point Jacob was technically a

⁵ https://www.google.com/search?q=images+of+ziggurat&newwindow=1&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ei=tk81VP70O8SxyATQiYLIDQ&ved=0CDQQ7Ak&biw=1745&bih=853#facrc=_&imgdii=_&imgrc=UsHGkIDNghaXiM%25A%3B-yBMSHeN4AAh5M%3Bhttp%25A%252F%252Fwww.crystalinks.com%252Ffurukziggurat.jpg%3Bhttp%25A%252F%252Fwww.crystalinks.com%252Fziggurat.html%3B596%3B347; https://www.google.com/search?q=images+of+ziggurat&newwindow=1&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ei=tk81VP70O8SxyATQiYLIDQ&ved=0CDQQ7Ak&biw=1745&bih=853#facrc=_&imgdii=_&imgrc=aXoXZpx-dTaWVM%25A%3BOjx9_8oFfd3xGM%3Bhttp%25A%252F%252Fbibleworld.com%252Ftravel-blog%252FZiggurat_Model_PergamumMuseumBerlin_fjenkins_091504_16c.jpg%3Bhttp%25A%252F%252Fferrelljenkins.wordpress.com%252F2010%252F09%252F15%252Fthe-ziggurat-at-ur%252F%3B1024%3B728, (accessed October 8, 2014).

fugitive criminal who could not be even tolerated in the land, he took the dream as a promise that one day he would conquer and own all the land and its inhabitants. In other words, he took the dream as a promise from God that one day he would manage to put a yoke on the neck not only of his twin brother, but on the neck of everyone else in the land. And if Jacob did hope that one day he would go up on the staircase and be crowned the name/Shem of the world, is that an idea that he discovered in a dream while he was sleeping in the open while on the run, or was that idea something that he had been brought up with by his mom? In other words, the dream that Jacob and his descendants would rule the world, was it his dream, or was it his mom's dream? And at this point I imagine that both fundamentalist and *critical* scholars would jump through the roof that this was God's dream because it was God who appeared to Jacob while he was asleep and promised him this great future about which he had never thought before. But even if Jacob did have a real dream when he saw someone talking to him when he was asleep or just a voice talking out of the blue, how did he know that whomever he saw or heard was God? Just because whomever he saw told him that he was the God of Abraham? Did the God of Abraham promise Abraham that he would be on top of the Tower of Babel and rule the world, or did that God call Abraham to run away from that Tower of Babel whose failure he caused by making people unable to talk and agree with one another just as Isaac and Ishmael – and he himself and his twin brother Esau – could not talk to each other and could not see eye to eye although they obviously spoke the same language? If God did promise Jacob that he would end up the ruler of the world, then we just need to follow the story because the author must explain how this God fulfilled that *blessing*. And indeed, after Jacob arrives at Rebekah's brother in Haran, Jacob meets his sweetheart and future wife which happens to be ... surprise, surprise, ... the daughter of Rebekah's brother and therefore a copycat of Rebekah. Because such ladies are so special to God, they are quite pricey, and although Abraham was rich enough to pay a hefty price to buy a luxury cave for his wife and buy an equally pricy wife for his son Isaac, Jacob, being *blessed* and having acquired the birthright, he had nothing but his bare hands so that the only way in which he could pay to Laban the hefty price for his princess daughter was to hire himself to Laban, what was basically offering himself as a slave since Laban actually did not give him any money for his labor:

When Laban heard the news about his sister's son Jacob, he ran to meet him; he embraced him and kissed him, and brought him to his house. Jacob told Laban all these things, and Laban said to him, "Surely you are my bone and my flesh!" And he stayed with him a month. Then Laban said to Jacob, "Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?" Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah's eyes were lovely, and Rachel was graceful and beautiful. Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel." Laban said, "It is better that I

give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me" (Gen 29:13–19).

It was only after Jacob told Laban how he had deprived his twin brother of half of his inheritance with a dish of vegetable stew and stole Esau's parental blessing with a trick taught by Laban's sister that Laban had the unquestionable proof that Jacob was his own bone and his own flesh because an impostor could not have produced such impressive and reliable identity documents. After it became clear that they were all in the family, taking into account that in this family nothing was for free so that Jacob had to work for his food but had nothing but his empty hands, Laban asked Jacob how much he wanted to be paid for his work. When Laban realized that Jacob was interested in his younger daughter to be his new mom whom Jacob must have missed terribly just as much as Isaac missed Sarah after she took residence in a luxury cave, Laban quickly agreed on the price and even made clear that he would have given her to someone else if someone else had offered a better price. For Laban, everything was for sale, even his daughters, and only the highest bidder mattered. Anyone doubts that Jacob had truly arrived home and had come to his own "bone" and his own "flesh"? What is even more important is that Jacob had come to his own mom, because we read next: "So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her" (Gen 29:20). And after seven years of hard labor, Jacob married his new mom and lived happily thereafter, right? Well, not quite, because further we read:

Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed." So Laban gathered together all the people of the place, and made a feast. But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob; and he went in to her. ... When morning came, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?" Laban said, "This is not done in our country – giving the younger before the firstborn. Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years." Jacob did so, and completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife (Gen 29:21–23, 25–28).

Rebekah may have told Jacob about the firstborn rule for boys and that it had to do with double inheritance but apparently forgot to tell him that there was also a firstborn rule for girls so that the firstborn girl had the right to pick first the husband, and unlike Esau who "despised" his firstborn right and give it up for a dish of vegetable stew, Lea was not going to treat so lightly her firstborn right and told his father that when the moment comes that Jacob is ready for the honeypot, she is the one to offer Jacob the honeypot and not her sister. And at this point I imagine that both fundamentalist and *critical* scholars jump through the roof that it was Laban who came up with the scheme and Lea had no choice but to submit to the decision of her abusive father who, as a man, planned for his daughter to be raped and eventually married by force to a man she did

not want. That Laban was a crook I do not doubt and that he liked the idea of having Jacob serve him basically as a slave for seven more years is understandable, but that Laban could have implemented the scheme without Lea's cooperation is virtually unthinkable. Therefore, it is very likely that when the wedding was planned, it was Lea who went to Laban and told him that it was her right to marry first and when it is the time for the bridegroom to receive his bride, Jacob should receive her and not her younger sister just as Rebekah told Jacob to go to Isaac to receive the parental blessing because he was now the firstborn. Whether Jacob ended up married to Lea or to Rachel clearly Laban did not care as long as the price was right and the price had already been paid, but since he realized that Jacob would complain, he came up with the idea to offer Rachel to Jacob in return for working for seven more years so that he would end up with a double bargain for his daughters since he did not expect to find a husband for Rachel who would outbid Jacob. Of course, Laban was shrewd enough not to tell Lea about his own brilliant idea that he had after Lea came up with her brilliant idea, and the next morning, after Jacob complained after he discovered that he had been duped and ended up with a wrong new mom, Lea must have been quite shocked to hear his father offer Jacob his younger sister as a wife in exchange for working for him for seven more years, so that what she thought would be a honeymoon, turned out to be a honeyweek that after only seven days, turned into another honeyweek but for her younger sister. What happens after those seven more days is the juiciest part of the story. How the honeymoon continued after the second week we are not told but apparently the issue was never settled between the two sisters as to whose husband Jacob was and it seems that he himself did not quite know who was his wife and he had to be told by his mom who was his wife and when he could have sex with her. For instance, later we find an interesting detail about the marital relationships in that saintly home:

In the days of wheat harvest Reuben went and found mandrakes in the field, and brought them to his mother Leah. Then Rachel said to Leah, "Please give me some of your son's mandrakes." But she said to her, "Is it a small matter that *you have taken away my husband?* Would you take away my son's mandrakes also?" Rachel said, "Then he may lie with you tonight for your son's mandrakes." When Jacob came from the field in the evening, Leah went out to meet him, and said, "You must come in to me; for I have hired you with my son's mandrakes." So he lay with her that night. And God heeded Leah, and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son [emphasis mine] (Gen 30:14-17).

Contrary to how both fundamentalist and *critical* scholars read the text, it was not Leah who stole the husband from Rachel, but from Leah's point of view, it was Rachel who stole the husband from her. True, Laban may have come up with the idea of offering Rachel for seven more years since Laban was interested only in profits, but according to Lea, Rachel should not have accepted the deal and should have refused to marry her

husband. Feminists rage about these patriarchal stories in which men are portrayed as all powerful who do not enjoy anything more than to abuse and sexually rape women and never notice that in these patriarchal stories men are for women just penises that they trade for some fruit or a bag of popcorn. If female sex were so cheap, prostitution would not be the oldest and the most profitable profession in the world. Was Rachel Jacob's wife, or was she his mom and he was his boy who clung to her skirt and did whatever she told him, even with whom he could have sex? When Jacob came home salivating thinking that he would have sex with his sexy wife, she told him that she assigned him to have sex for that night with the ugly sister, and he not only obliged, but was able to perform so that Leah remained pregnant. And at this point I imagine that both fundamentalist and *critical* scholars jump through the roof that Rachel wanted those mandrakes because she knew that God had made her barren and believed that those mandrakes would make her fertile and finally would remain pregnant and that is the reason she traded the penis for those mandrakes. But if she really wanted to become pregnant, she must have known at least this much about fertility that you need a penis before you need any mandrakes, and whatever she was willing to trade for those mandrakes, she should have kept the penis for herself before anything else. Although Rachel did not give too much money on Jacob's penis, she did blame him for not having children: "When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister; and she said to Jacob, 'Give me children, or I shall die!' Jacob became very angry with Rachel and said, 'Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?'" (Gen 30:1-2). Again, Rachel is barren because God made her barren although later she is able to give birth, and not just once, but twice? Does it sound familiar? Of course, a scholar like Robert Alter would argue that these were just literary conventions so that no writer at that time could write a story in which a woman just gets children naturally without first being barren and then miraculously becoming fertile, and no writer could write different stories because no one would read them. An ancient reader, however, would have concluded that if there are such parallelisms in stories, is because there are similar behaviors when people have similar mentalities, particularly when they inherit them from their ancestors, and if Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel look like copycats, is not because God predestined them or pre-programmed them, but because they all grow up with the same ideas and they never questioned them. True, Rachel does not deny her marital relationship with Jacob and does not end up in bed with some local ruler, but she passes on her husband to her sister and she becomes interested in having children only when finds herself in competition with another lady. While Sarah ended up fighting with her slave woman Hagar and Rebekah with the wives of her son Esau, Rachel ended up fighting with her own sister with whom she ended up living in the same home and had to decide who was the boss. That is, since the house had that concept of the Tower of Babel with a name/Shem at the top, the question was which of the two ladies was at the top and was *blessed*? True, Leah was older and she

felt that that was enough to qualify her as the boss, but Rachel was prettier and pretty women feel that they should be the boss because all men would die – and would be willing to kill – in order to get in bed with them, and Rachel felt that she was the one who resembled Sarah and Rebekah and therefore was entitled to be the boss. And when ladies fight to decide who is the boss, they do not use their fists as men do; they use children or rather their fists, and that is the reason they want boys, and as many as possible. This is made quite explicit by the text:

So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah. He served Laban for another seven years. When the LORD saw that Leah was unloved, he opened her womb; but Rachel was barren. Leah conceived and bore a son, and she named him Reuben; for she said, "Because the LORD has looked on my affliction; surely now my husband will love me." She conceived again and bore a son, and said, "Because the LORD has heard that I am hated, he has given me this son also"; and she named him Simeon. Again she conceived and bore a son, and said, "Now this time my husband will be joined to me, because I have borne him three sons"; therefore he was named Levi. She conceived again and bore a son, and said, "This time I will praise the LORD"; therefore she named him Judah; then she ceased bearing (Gen 29:30–35).

At this point I imagine that feminists start to rage again that in these patriarchal stories written by men for men women are portrayed as wanting boys because that is what men want and the women have to please men because men would love women only when they give birth to boys, and although Leah does voice the hope that her giving birth to boys would make her husband appreciate her, the story makes clear that that is not true so that Jacob keeps loving Rachel in spite of the fact that Rachel does not give birth to any children and even assigns Jacob to have sex with Leah skipping her own sex so that Leah can give birth to as many children as she can. Eventually Rachel decides to have children herself, but does not want to go through the trouble to give birth herself therefore she decides that she acquires children through her slave woman: "Then she said, 'Here is my maid Bilhah; go in to her, that she may bear upon my knees and that I too may have children through her.' So she gave him her maid Bilhah as a wife; and Jacob went in to her." (Gen 30:3–4). When did we hear this before? Anyone doubts that Rachel was a true copycat of Sarah? True, Rachel did not end up fighting with her slave woman as Sarah did, because when Bilhah gave birth to a son, we read: "And Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son. Then Rachel said, 'God has judged me, and has also heard my voice and given me a son'; therefore she named him Dan" (30:5–6). Although Rachel does not say with whom was she quarreling and God had judged that her voice was on top, when Bilhah gave birth to her second son, Rachel is more explicit: "Rachel's maid Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son. Then Rachel said, 'With mighty wrestlings [נַפְתָּוּלֵי אֱלֹהִים, *naphittûlê ʾēlōhîm*, "fights of God"] I have wrestled with my sister, and have prevailed'; so she named him Naphtali" (Gen 30:7–8). Anyone still unclear as to what these "fights of God" were all about? Could it be that

those biblical scholars who translated NRSV were so ignorant about biblical Hebrew that they did not know what the word *אֱלֹהִים*, *ēlōhīm*, meant and translated it “mighty” instead of “God”? Or are feminist scholars so blind that although they see all imaginable abuses that men do against women while looking for female power that they never see these ladies fighting? After receiving two powerful uppercuts from Rachel through her slave woman, as a mighty warrior herself, Leah responded accordingly:

When Leah saw that she had ceased bearing children, she took her maid Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife. Then Leah's maid Zilpah bore Jacob a son. And Leah said, “Good fortune!” so she named him Gad. Leah's maid Zilpah bore Jacob a second son. And Leah said, “Happy am I! For the women will call me happy”; so she named him Asher (Gen 30:9–13).

By now, it is clear that these fights have nothing to do with God or with winning male love, but it has to do with the happiness that women experience when fighting other women, particularly their own sisters. And the reason women want boys is not because their husbands want them, but because they want them in their fights with other women. And the reason the boys are so valuable for women is because women have tiny fists while boys have powerful fists if their mothers know how to raise them and train them since they are babies. Realizing that her sister had one up on her since Leah had children of her own while matching the children that Rachel acquired through her slave woman, Rachel realized just like Sarah that it was about time to have children of her own, and ... surprise, surprise, ... she was no longer barren although she was no longer in her prime: “Then God remembered Rachel, and God heeded her and opened her womb. She conceived and bore a son, and said, ‘God has taken away my reproach’; and she named him Joseph, saying, ‘May the LORD add to me another son!’” (Gen 30:22–24). Probably because she was so barren, later she managed to give birth to another son, although the birth of that son cost her dearly because she died when giving birth. Since these “fights of God” were about giving birth to boys, it can be said that Rachel died on the battlefield. Eventually, Leah had the last laugh.

Or did she? Feminists rage that women want boys because men want boys and men want boys because they only value men while they think that girls and women are worthless, but the reason not only men, but particularly women want boys is because boys are better at fighting than girls. This does not mean that girls do not have muscles and cannot kill, but because they can become pregnant and while they are pregnant or nursing a baby they are vulnerable and unable to fight, their killing potential is much reduced compared to that of males who can be killing machines all the time. Although it is true that men can use their sons to kill, it is always mothers who are in the position to raise their sons to be fighters and killers. We noticed that Abraham was not a fighter to the extent that when a conflict took place between his herders and those of his

nephew Lot, he allowed Lot to choose where he wanted to live rather than fight for his *privileges*. By contrast, Ishmael became a fighter because her mother was fighting with her mistress. As far as Isaac was concerned, it was his mother Sarah who fought to defend his privileges and he himself tended to avoid conflict:

And Abimelech said to Isaac, "Go away from us; you have become too powerful for us." So Isaac departed from there and camped in the valley of Gerar and settled there. Isaac dug again the wells of water that had been dug in the days of his father Abraham; for the Philistines had stopped them up after the death of Abraham; and he gave them the names that his father had given them. But when Isaac's servants dug in the valley and found there a well of spring water, the herders of Gerar quarreled with Isaac's herders, saying, "The water is ours." So he called the well Esek, because they contended with him. Then they dug another well, and they quarreled over that one also; so he called it Sitnah. He moved from there and dug another well, and they did not quarrel over it; so he called it Rehoboth, saying, "Now the LORD has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land" (Gen 26:16–22).

Isaac may not have been a good fighter since he did not have a full brother to fight with, but that changed with Rebekah's sons. We noticed that Esau became a fighter because he was *predestined* by his parents to be a slave to his younger brother and he could break the yoke that his brother put on his neck only by using a sword. Any wonder that Esau became not a master of plowing or of tending sheep but rather of using arrows and swords? As we remember, Esau was the preferred son by Isaac and he decided to *curse* Esau to become a slave after Rebekah decided that Jacob was the *blessed* son. As a result of this decision, not only Esau became a fighter, but Jacob himself. True, Jacob not always fought with a sword, but fighting did not involve only muscles because it involved cunning and deception as well. As we remember when mythology was discussed, the Greek hero Odysseus was considered such a great fighter not so much because of his ability to kill, but primarily because of his skill at cunning, deception, and lack of any scruples. We noticed how unscrupulous Jacob was when he acquired the birthright and the parental *blessing*. His cunning is further suggested in his dealings with Laban. Of course, Laban was a master crook himself and managed to get Jacob work for him for fourteen years in exchange for his daughters whom he still considered his daughters so that, when Jacob decided to leave, Laban viewed Jacob as if he had plundered his property and had taken his daughters and their children as booty. When Jacob ran away, Laban told him: "The daughters are my daughters, the children are my children, the flocks are my flocks, and all that you see is mine" (Gen 31:43). Really? Then for twenty years, what did he work for? What else but a slave had he been all the time since even his wives and their children were not his? Jacob may have thought that the paid for those wives by working for Laban for fourteen years, but obviously Laban thought of him as a slave whom he acquired for free to whom he offered shelter, and the women whom he gave him were also slave women whom he gave him to live with

and who remained his property. This is the regulation that explains how Laban viewed his relationship with Jacob:

When you buy a male Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, but in the seventh he shall go out a free person, without debt. If he comes in single, he shall go out single; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him. If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her master's and he shall go out alone. But if the slave declares, "I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out a free person," then his master shall bring him before God. He shall be brought to the door or the doorpost; and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him for life (Exod 21:2–6).

Since it is obvious that this is the regulation by which Laban judges Jacob when Jacob ran away, the seven years that Jacob served Laban was not meant to be payment for his future wife, but rather payment for his own freedom when Jacob would have been entitled to leave Laban and go back to Canaan as a free person. Since he did not choose to do that – no doubt because he was afraid of Esau – from that moment Laban considered Jacob as his slave for life and at that point he decided to give him as wives not some of his slave girls whom we do not know whether he had them or not, but his own daughters whom he considered as being his property and therefore no different than other slaves. That even Lea and Rachel felt offended that they were treated as slaves by being offered as wives to a slave they themselves make clear when they tell Jacob: "Then Rachel and Leah answered him, 'Is there any portion or inheritance left to us in our father's house? Are we not regarded by him as foreigners? For he has sold us, and he has been using up the money given for us'" (Gen 31:14–15). Consequently, after twenty years, Jacob not only had no right to run away from his master emptyhanded anymore, but more so taking with him a large part of the property of his master including his wives and his children. Legally he had been a slave from the beginning and after twenty years, he no longer had the right even to leave his master emptyhanded. And that was because he had managed to inherit the birthright, steal the parental *blessing*, and God assured him in a dream that he would be blessed where he was going? Does anyone doubt anymore that this God keeps his promises? If for fourteen years Jacob worked for Laban to pay for those daughters and after those fourteen years those daughters were still Laban's daughters and not Jacob's wives, then Jacob worked fourteen years for free, exactly like a slave. Quite a blessing! Anyone interested in being blessed! After those fourteen years, Laban managed to get Jacob work for him for six more years with the following agreement – although clearly Laban thought all the time that Jacob was working for him all the time for free:

He said, "What shall I give you?" Jacob said, "You shall not give me anything; if you will do this for me, I will again feed your flock and keep it: let me pass through all your flock today, removing from it every speckled and spotted sheep and every black lamb, and the spotted and speckled among the goats; and such

shall be my wages. So my honesty will answer for me later, when you come to look into my wages with you. Every one that is not speckled and spotted among the goats and black among the lambs, if found with me, shall be counted stolen." Laban said, "Good! Let it be as you have said." But that day Laban removed the male goats that were striped and spotted, and all the female goats that were speckled and spotted, every one that had white on it, and every lamb that was black, and put them in charge of his sons; and he set a distance of three days' journey between himself and Jacob, while Jacob was pasturing the rest of Laban's flock (Gen 30:31–36).

Let us notice that this was Jacob's offer and Laban quickly accepted it because regularly goats and sheep in Palestine were of solid color and those that were spotted were rarities so that, when Jacob decided to keep only those rarities, Laban felt that Jacob would be working and be paid only with the crumbs that fell under his table. What Laban did not realize was that Jacob was truly his bone and his flesh and therefore was a master crook himself so that, when Jacob made the offer, he had something else in mind. As an experienced herder, he knew that the kind of offspring animals produced depended on how they mated, and if you control their mating, you control the characteristics of their offspring. And the text makes clear that that was what Jacob had in mind when he made the apparent extremely generous offer:

Then Jacob took fresh rods of poplar and almond and plane, and peeled white streaks in them, exposing the white of the rods. He set the rods that he had peeled in front of the flocks in the troughs, that is, the watering places, where the flocks came to drink. And since they bred when they came to drink, the flocks bred in front of the rods, and so the flocks produced young that were striped, speckled, and spotted. Jacob separated the lambs, and set the faces of the flocks toward the striped and the completely black animals in the flock of Laban; and he put his own droves apart, and did not put them with Laban's flock. Whenever the stronger of the flock were breeding, Jacob laid the rods in the troughs before the eyes of the flock, that they might breed among the rods, but for the feebler of the flock he did not lay them there; so the feebler were Laban's, and the stronger Jacob's. Thus the man grew exceedingly rich, and had large flocks, and male and female slaves, and camels and donkeys (30:37–43).

Were Jacob and ancient readers so naive as to believe that with such a trick one could control the color of the animals that are born? That Jacob practiced what today would be called selective breeding is clearly indicated by the detail that when his own animals bred, he used strong stock, and when Laban's animals breed, he used weak stock. Moreover, that the trick with the rods is just a ploy to make his dishonesty look innocent is further suggested through a supposed dream that Jacob had in which it was actually God who miraculously made the speckled male animals impregnate the females in heat to produce speckled offspring:

Thus God has taken away the livestock of your father, and given them to me. During the mating of the flock I once had a dream in which I looked up and saw that the male goats that leaped upon the flock were striped, speckled, and

mottled. Then the angel of God said to me in the dream, "Jacob," and I said, "Here I am!" And he said, "Look up and see that all the goats that leap on the flock are striped, speckled, and mottled; for I have seen all that Laban is doing to you. I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me" (Gen 31:9–13).

Consequently, Jacob himself did not believe that the spotted offspring had anything to do with those peeled rods and provides another explanation that somehow God manipulated the way animals mated so that they produced only offspring that benefitted Jacob. Did Jacob do anything wrong? Of course not! If God favored him and manipulated the mating of the animals to benefit him, what could he do? When you are *blessed*, what else can you do but humbly accept whatever privileges God is piling upon you? If he saw in a dream, however, that the spotted offspring was the result of the fact that spotted males impregnated the females in heat, what prevented him to control himself the mating of the animals that were under his control? Why did he need God to do what he could have done it himself? Well, if he had done it himself, then no one would fail to see that he was a crook and a double dealer, but if God did it, then who would dare to question what God does and who can blame Jacob for humbly accepting whatever God is giving him? Yes, if you work for a company and you pocket the money that belongs to the company then you would be called a thief, but if God is putting the money of the company into your pocket, who would dare to blame you and call you anything but *blessed*? Although poor Jacob did try to cheat by using those rods, he was just naive and eventually did something quite innocent, and if there was some cheating involved so that Laban ended up a loser and Jacob a winner, it was because the real cheating was done by God who controlled how the animals mated! And the reason God had to control how the animals mated was because Jacob was too naive to pair animals when they mated although he had full control over all herds, those of his own and those that belonged to Laban. And God did the cheating to keep his promise that he would place Jacob on top of the world symbolized by that staircase and the stone obelisk that he anointed symbolizing his own anointing as the ruler of the world. Consequently, Jacob did not need to do any cheating or any fighting because it was God who was doing all the cheating and all the fighting for him.

Or, was he? When finally, Jacob returned to his native country we learn that he not only had to do some real fighting, but that he was quite good at it:

Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me [בְּרַכְתָּנִי, *bēraktānī*]." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name [שִׁמְךָ, *shimkā*]." But he said, "Why is it

that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip (Gen 32:24–31).

That Jacob fought with his brother to take his double inheritance is understandable if his mother told him that he needed that inheritance so that they could live happily together thereafter, but why did he fight with a stranger about whom he knew nothing, not even his name? If God wanted through Abraham's descendants to set up a world in which people start fighting anytime they come into contact with each other even when they have no idea who they are and why they are fighting, what kind of world would that be? And how would that world be any different from the one that has always existed? The key words in the passage are "name/Shem" and "blessing," and that sends us back to Noah, his cursing of Ham and of Canaan to be slaves of "name/Shem" who was *blessed* to be on top of the Tower of Babel. Jacob knew that if he wanted to be *blessed* and at the top of the stairway that he saw and be anointed at the top of the obelisk that he erected and anointed, he had to fight with anyone, including God himself because that is the only way you can get to the very top: by fighting anyone and defeating anyone. Jacob assumed that the stranger claimed to be the "name/Shem" and therefore he had to defeat him and force him to submit by *blessing* Jacob and admit through that *blessing* his subordination to Jacob. When God *blessed* Jacob, God basically declared that Jacob would be his boss and God would be the faithful servant of the boss doing anything that the boss wanted. This is how Jacob understood a *blessing* and that is why he wanted *blessings* so badly. He may have been a fugitive with only a stick in his hand, but now that through a *blessing* he had God as a committed lackey to do whatever he wanted, he did not need to worry about anything because, if he wanted something, it was God's job to make sure that Jacob got it. The same reasoning applies when someone else *blesses* someone: The one who blesses, claims to have God at his fingertips, and by *blessing* someone else, would pass that God as a faithful servant to another boss so that God is doing now what the new boss wants. When Isaac blessed Jacob, God was for Isaac a faithful dog whom he passed over to Jacob so that from now on God would follow Jacob as a faithful dog doing whatever Jacob tells him. After Isaac blessed Jacob, did the faithful dog God do anything anymore for Isaac? We do not know; what we do know is that whatever the faithful dog God did, was to follow Jacob and do whatever Jacob needed. Moreover, when someone has God at his fingertips because is *blessed*, then automatically all others are *cursed* and condemned to be slaves of the one who is God's favorite. That is the kind of human relationships for the reasoned reality that the drunkard Noah established through the concept of blessings and curses, reasoned reality that was the foundation of the Tower of Babel and was inherited by Abraham's descendants through their mothers. In order to get to the top and to be blessed you need to fight with anyone, including your twin brother, and once you are blessed, you

need to fight with anyone else who might come your way to prevent him to get to the top and be blessed so that you make sure that you are the one who always ends up blessed and not someone else. With whom was Jacob fighting? The reason the stranger wanted to leave before daybreak can only mean that in daylight Jacob would have recognized him and therefore he must have been someone he knew, probably one of his own men who had similar ambitions like himself. Vision was considered by ancient people as the most important sense and therefore was used to refer to the rationality and the understanding that the mind provided while the deprivation of the ability to see indicated the inability to think and to make rational judgments. We remember that when Eve acquired the ability to think after eating from the tree of knowledge, her experience of acquiring the ability to think is described as an opening of her eyes. By contrast, being blind or being in the dark, describes the inability to think and behave relationally. Humans who fight without knowing whom they are fighting and why they are fighting are completely deprived of rationality because even animals do not do that therefore, whenever humans fight, they are in the dark even if they fight in broad daylight. True, animals do fight, but whenever they fight, they always have a reason: they are either under threat and have to defend themselves, or are hungry, or have to defeat a competitor when they have to follow their instinct to mate. Fighting for the sake of fighting is virtually unknown in the animal world. And who won the fight? We are told that the stranger managed to hit Jacob so hard that he took his hip out of its socket. In a fight, this would be a disabling injury that would make a fighter unable even to stand, let alone to fight, and at this point Jacob must have been laying on the ground. Under such circumstances, any fighter, even in a modern boxing match, would be considered defeated. Not Jacob! He had one last weapon while lying on the ground: grabbing the opponent from his feet and not letting him go. It is the fighting skill that he had learned while still in his mother's womb and used it when his brother Esau managed to come out of the womb first and he grabbed him from the feet to tell him: "Not so fast, brother, the fight is not over now that we are out of the womb. You may have managed to get out of the womb first, but the fight is not over because in the end I will manage to end up being born first and even be blessed." Apparently, the stranger, scared that the daybreak may take place and Jacob would recognize him, when realizing what a formidable fighter Jacob was, asked him whether he was the "name/Shem." When Jacob told him his name which meant that he was an expert in grabbing those ahead of him on their heels to pulling them behind so that he can elbow his way to the front and to the top, and when the stranger realized that that grip was like the jaws of a bulldog from which no one can escape unless he submits, not only he accepted to bless Jacob and therefore admit his defeat, but decided to give Jacob a name that properly described what he was, that is, a fighter that would fight with everyone, including God himself, and he would not give up until he wins. Can anyone dream to

be more *blessed* than that and can even God dare to fight him and not *bless* him to admit his subordination to Jacob?

After managing to defeat such a formidable fighter whom both fundamentalist and *critical* scholars understand to have been more than human if not God himself, we are ready to see how Jacob is going to knock out his brother Esau in order to put on his neck that yoke that Isaac *blessed* Esau with. So far, Jacob only had Laban's yoke on his own neck and now that he managed to break that yoke, it was time to finally put that yoke on his brother's neck and fulfill the *blessings* that Isaac had pronounced. As we are excited to find out how the mighty fighter who defeated God himself was going to crush his brother, we learn that Jacob sent a delegation to meet Esau and the news that was brought back scared the mighty hero:

Jacob sent messengers before him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom, instructing them, "Thus you shall say to my lord Esau: Thus says *your servant Jacob*, 'I have lived with Laban *as an alien*, and stayed until now; and I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, male and female slaves; and I have sent to tell *my lord*, in order that I may find favor in your sight.'" The messengers returned to Jacob, saying, "We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him." Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed; and he divided the people that were with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two companies, thinking, "If Esau comes to the one company and destroys it, then the company that is left will escape" [emphasis mine] (Gen 32:3-8).

Rebekah did not want her *blessed* son to live with the evil Canaanites and instead she sent him to live with her brother Laban in order to live in that select family of saints, only for Jacob to discover that he was treated there as a foreigner and basically used as a slave, and now, when he returned to the land which God had promised him, he declares himself "servant" and recognizes his brother Esau as his "lord," bowing to the ground before Esau and stretching out his neck for Esau to put a yoke on it. Does anyone doubt that God is really keeping his promises when he *blesses* his *chosen* ones? Realizing that when offering his neck Esau may not be interested in just placing a yoke on it and turn Jacob into a slave but rather to chop off the neck altogether, he prepared for the worst-case scenario and divided his company in two groups, hoping that Esau would be stupid enough to believe that after killing the first group, he has destroyed the whole family of Jacob so that half of the family would survive. Again, he counted on his cunning and shrewdness as his main weapon. Whom he thought would be offered to be slaughtered and whom he hoped would survive, he made clear by which wife and her children he placed in the first group and which ones he placed in the last group destined for survival:

Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two maids. He put the

maids with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. He himself went on ahead of them, *bowing himself to the ground seven times*, until he came near his brother. But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and *fell on his neck* and kissed him, and they wept. When Esau looked up and saw the women and children, he said, "Who are these with you?" Jacob said, "The children whom God has graciously given your servant." Then *the maids drew near, they and their children, and bowed down; Leah likewise and her children drew near and bowed down; and finally Joseph and Rachel drew near, and they bowed down*. Esau said, "What do you mean by all this company that I met?" Jacob answered, "To find favor with my lord." But Esau said, "I have enough, *my brother*; keep what you have for yourself." Jacob said, "No, please; if I find favor with you, then accept my present from my hand; for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God – since you have received me with such favor. Please accept my gift that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have everything I want." So he urged him, and he took it [emphasis mine] (Gen 33:1–11).

The encounter with the *evil* Esau turned out to be quite different from what Jacob had imagined because the *evil* Esau did not kill Jacob as the *saintly* Jacob no doubt would have done with the *evil* Esau if Jacob had been in Esau's shoes. After a long ceremony of "bowing down," first by Jacob and then by all the family, calling themselves "servants" and calling Esau "lord," offering their necks to have the yoke placed on them, Esau, instead of placing a yoke on the neck of his brother, he fell on that neck and embraced him, while kept calling him "my brother." Can anyone imagine anything *eviler* and is there any wonder why God hated Esau so much? Having a materialist mentality according to which nothing was for free and anything had to be paid – even a dish of vegetable stew – Jacob thought that Esau's goodwill had to be bought with hefty gifts, and when Esau asked Jacob why his herds were travelling in groups and not kept together, Jacob explained that those herds that traveled ahead of him were intended to be gifts for him, something that puzzled the *evil* Esau who did not understand why a brother would want to take gifts from another brother. Since Jacob insisted, Esau apparently accepted the gifts, and that raises the question who was *blessed* and who was *cursed*? According to those *blessings* and *curses*, Jacob was entitled to two thirds of the parental inheritance and Esau to only one third, but as a result of being *blessed*, Jacob had to run away from home so that Esau ended up being *cursed* with inheriting the whole property while Jacob was *blessed* to run away with only a stick in his hand, and after working for Laban as a slave for twenty years and managing to take with him some of the wealth that he produced through hard labor and no doubt most of it remained with Laban, when returned home, the *blessed* Jacob, instead of claiming two thirds of Esau's property that represented the birthright that the *evil* Esau sold for a dish of vegetable stew or at least to claim one third of the property since Jacob did not live with his parents, now it is the *blessed* Jacob who is giving to the *cursed* Esau gifts from what Jacob had acquired through his hard labor to which Esau had no right. Consequently, the *evil* Esau who sold his birthright ended up not only inheriting

everything while the *blessed* Jacob inherited nothing, but the same *cursed* Esau received hefty gifts from the *blessed* Jacob that Jacob managed to acquire through hard labor as a slave! Any wonder that people want so badly to be *blessed* like Jacob and not be *cursed* like the *evil* Esau? Anyone doubts that God is really a faithful dog who obediently carries out those *blessings* and *curses*?

After showing his evilness by kissing Jacob instead of killing him and all his family, Esau hoped that he and his brother would finally live together: "Then Esau said, 'Let us journey on our way, and I will go alongside you'" (Gen 33:12). Probably because Jacob did not want his saintly character to be tainted by living close to someone who was so evil that would sell his birthright for a vegetable stew, he pretended that he could not go with Esau because he was moving too slowly and did not want to slow down Esau:

But Jacob said to him, "My lord knows that the children are frail and that the flocks and herds, which are nursing, are a care to me; and if they are overdriven for one day, all the flocks will die. Let my lord pass on ahead of his servant, and I will lead on slowly, according to the pace of the cattle that are before me and according to the pace of the children, until I come to my lord in Seir" (Gen 33:13–14).

Not being aware that Esau was dealing with a crook who said one thing but had something else in mind, he thought that Jacob really intended to come to Seir to live with him and offered to leave behind some of his fighters to protect Jacob on the way: "So Esau said, 'Let me leave with you some of the people who are with me.' But he said, 'Why should my lord be so kind to me?'" (Gen 33:15). Jacob could not understand why should a brother be kind to another brother because he had never been kind to anyone. Being *blessed*, he knew that God was kind to him and to no one else, and when God is kind to you, why do you need anyone's kindness, even the kindness of a brother? Consequently, the two brothers went in opposite directions: "So Esau returned that day on his way to Seir. But Jacob journeyed to Succoth, and built himself a house, and made booths for his cattle; therefore the place is called Succoth" (Gen 33:16–17). The only time when the two brothers lived together was when they were in their mother's womb, and even then, they fought together. Being a fighter, Jacob went where he found an open field and established himself there making sure that no one lived around him.

Jacob may have been able to stay away from his brother and avoid any conflicts with him, but his sons were not as lucky. Their mothers fought with each other which one would have more sons because more sons meant more fighting power and the one who would have more sons would eventually have the final laugh. When fighting to get Jacob as a husband, Lea may have thought that she defeated her sister when she managed to marry Jacob using deception, only to discover that her sister came behind her back and claimed Jacob for herself. When fighting to give birth to sons, Rachel only

managed to have two, and when the last one was born, she died on the battlefield. Lea may have laughed thinking that she not only had defeated her sister as far as the number of sons was concerned, but her sister was finally dead. If Lea had a big party at Rachel's death, she must have been too quick to celebrate because the fights of the Lord that were the fights of the two ladies were carried on by their sons. Therefore, the fights of the Lord that are fought by the ladies become the fights of the Lord that are fought by the sons of the ladies. Rachel's sons may have been fewer and they may have been the underdog, but who are the better fighters and who will win the fights of God and whom God will crown as victors is what makes the rest of Genesis the most fascinating story both for fundamentalist and for *critical* scholars. As one would expect, the sons of a shepherd would end up shepherding flocks, but one of the sons quite early in life stood out:

This is the story of the family of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him (Gen 37:2-4).

We remember that when the two ladies were fighting to produce as many children as possible, just like their grandma Sarah, they decided to give their own slave girls as concubines to their beloved husband whom they both wanted just for themselves, and just like their grandma Sarah, the children born from those slave women, although claimed by themselves, they considered them secondhand children and Joseph no doubt viewed them as his subordinates and viewed himself as their master and their supervisor although he was younger. We are not told what exactly those half-brothers did except that the "report" was bad, and since the report was produced by Joseph, was the report bad because it accurately depicted what those half-brothers did, or was it bad because children born from slave women are by their nature evil compared to children born from holy stock from which Sarah herself came and are necessarily saints? That what Joseph told Jacob was exactly what Jacob himself expected and wanted to hear the text makes clear by the detail that Jacob elevated Joseph to the position of boss over those secondhand sons by providing him with a robe that even today is the sign of dignitaries. Was Joseph a shepherd anymore running after sheep and goats and milking them wrapped up in those long robes with long sleeves? Any wonder that those half-brothers did not like to discover that one of them who used to help them with their chores now is not only their boss, but instead of helping them with their dirty work, was only conveying bad reports to the CEO to make the resumes of his subordinates look bad and his own resume look better to get a promotion and a pay raise? That Joseph had ambitions to become boss

not only over his brothers born from the slave women, but over all his brothers, he openly told them:

Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. He said to them, "Listen to this dream that I dreamed. There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf." His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?" So they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words. He had another dream, and told it to his brothers, saying, "Look, I have had another dream: the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me." But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him, and said to him, "What kind of dream is this that you have had? Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow to the ground before you?" So his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind (Gen 37:5–11).

Let us notice a crescendo in these dreams. According to the first dream, Joseph dreamed to have all his eleven brothers bow down before him, but according to the second dream, not only his eleven brothers represented by eleven stars bow down before him, but even his father and his mother represented by the sun and the moon would worship him. That Jacob was not surprised to learn that Joseph dreamed to rule over his eleven brothers is understandable since he himself was grooming Joseph for that position, but what even he found offensive was the idea that even himself and his wife would end up bowing down before Joseph. Let us remember that at this point Joseph's mother, Rachel, was dead and therefore the moon must have referred to Lea, the lady with whom Joseph's mother had been fighting. Where did Joseph get this dream that Lea and Lea's husband would eventually bow down before Rachel's son since even Jacob found this dream offensive? Does it ring a bell? At this point I imagine that both fundamentalist and *critical* scholars would jump through the roof that these were not Joseph's dreams that he got them from his mother but rather were revelations from God by which God made known his plans to make Joseph boss over all his family and the story has the purpose to prove that when God picks a favorite, even when humans want to thwart those plans, nothing can prevent God from fulfilling his plans so that in the end God's favorite has the last laugh. Although this is what traditional interpretations claim that Genesis wants to teach through these stories, there is no indication that those dreams that Joseph had were actually given by God or had anything to do with God. Although often in the Bible people claim that the dreams that they have do come from God in spite of the fact that there is no reason to suppose that God has anything to do with those dreams, in this case Joseph does not even claim that those dreams came from God. Did Joseph himself believe that those dreams were given by God? Whether he took those dreams as messages from God that he was predestined to rule over his brothers we do not know, but what the text makes clear is that his

brothers took those dreams as proof of his own ambitions to have his brothers bow down at his feet and understandably, they found the idea outrageous. That brothers may end up bowing down and serving a stranger is not particularly humiliating since one would not expect any sympathy from a stranger, but for brothers to end up bowing down to another brother and serve him is particularly humiliating since brothers would naturally try to defend and help the other brothers. If Joseph had presented a dream in which some Canaanites who lived in the area would one day bow down before him probably his brothers would not have found the idea so offensive, and if a Canaanite young man had told them similar dreams according to which Jacob's family would end up bowing down and serving him, probably Joseph's brothers would have found such dreams understandable even if they would not have liked them, but to discover that one of their brothers had such dreams, they found the idea not only offensive, but quite demonic. Although Jacob found the idea of him and his wife bowing down before Joseph disturbing, he himself endorsed Joseph's dreams by appointing him as the unofficial ruler over his brothers, and that is seen from the fact that he no longer participated in the work that his brothers were involved: "Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. And Israel said to Joseph, 'Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them.' He answered, 'Here I am.' So he said to him, 'Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me'" (Gen 37:12-14). Apparently, Jacob wanted to hear some more bad news about his evil sons told by his good son, and as it is often the case, people who are branded as evil, end up doing the evil things that they are expected to do:

They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams." But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life." Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him" – that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father. So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers agreed (Gen 37:18-27).

The brothers may have been evil, but it seems that they were not totally evil because, as they contemplated a cold-blooded murder, they decided not to kill Joseph but to throw him in a pit to die of drowning, but when Reuben suggested an empty pit so that Joseph

would die of starvation and not by drowning, then they found the idea even more human and accepted it. Whether they actually shed Joseph's blood or not, killing him by letting him die in a pit was still murder, and when a caravan of Ishmaelites came by, they decided that selling Joseph as a slave was more appropriate not only because they would not actually kill Joseph, but would turn his dreams on their head: While Joseph hoped that he would be at the top of the pyramid when others would bow down before him, he ended up as a slave, that is, at the bottom of the pyramid when he would bow down before everyone else. An ancient reader, however, would remember that these Ishmaelites were descendants of Ishmael, the son of the slave woman with whom Joseph's grandma Sarah was fighting the fights of the Lord because she wanted all her *blessings* to go only to her descendant Isaac and did not want her descendants to have anything to do with the descendants of Hagar the Egyptian, and now, we have the *blessed* descendant of Sarah being sold by the other descendants of Sarah to become a slave to the descendants of that slave woman whom Sarah could not tolerate in her house anymore even as a slave. Can the irony be bitter? Is it hard to imagine what kind of world would these descendants of Abraham through Sarah establish? And I imagine that both fundamentalist and *critical* scholars would jump through the roof that although it may be true that at this point evil may have prevailed, the beauty of the story is precisely that in the end God manages not only to accomplish his plan to make those dreams that he gave to Joseph come true, but eventually Joseph became the savior of everyone from starvation, including his brothers and his family. It is only when one waits for the end of the story that a reader discovers with great pleasure that this is an amazingly success story.

But is it? It is true that as a slave, Joseph seemed to be a successful slave because he is elevated to the position of the supervisor of the other slaves, a skill that he had perfected by practicing it on his brothers:

Now Joseph was taken down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there. The LORD was with Joseph, and he became a successful man; he was in the house of his Egyptian master. His master saw that the LORD was with him, and that the LORD caused all that he did to prosper in his hands. So Joseph found favor in his sight and attended him; he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had. From the time that he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had, the LORD blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of the LORD was on all that he had, in house and field. So he left all that he had in Joseph's charge; and, with him there, he had no concern for anything but the food that he ate (Gen 39:1-6).

Contrary to what the feminists claim that in the Bible men are obsessed with abusing women sexually, if men are interested to taste a new fruit, is because a woman has opened their mind to something else as we saw in the case of Adam and Eve. Just as it

was the case with the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who did whatever their wives told them, so also the true master in the household where Joseph ended up as a slave was the woman and not the man, therefore one day the mistress fancied that the new slave could be used as a sex toy:

Now Joseph was handsome and good-looking. And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, "Lie with me." But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Look, with me here, my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my hand. He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" And although she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not consent to lie beside her or to be with her. One day, however, when he went into the house to do his work, and while no one else was in the house, she caught hold of his garment, saying, "Lie with me!" But he left his garment in her hand, and fled and ran outside. When she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled outside, she called out to the members of her household and said to them, "See, my husband has brought among us a Hebrew to insult us! He came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice; and when he heard me raise my voice and cry out, he left his garment beside me, and fled outside." Then she kept his garment by her until his master came home, and she told him the same story, saying, "The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us, came in to me to insult me; but as soon as I raised my voice and cried out, he left his garment beside me, and fled outside." When his master heard the words that his wife spoke to him, saying, "This is the way your servant treated me," he became enraged. And Joseph's master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined; he remained there in prison (Gen 39:6-20).

To be a slave meant to be at the bottom of the society and just when Joseph thought that finally he was starting to climb the social ladder because he had become the slave supervisor, he ended up in prison. According to ancient sociology, slaves were at the lowest level with ordinary citizens being at the ground level while prisoners were viewed as being underground. Can anyone go lower? Joseph may have been a slave in the society but prisons are great levelers were ruthless murderers, innocent people, celebrities, and high officials may end up bedfellows. Although in ancient times prisons were viewed as the place where the dead people lived because those who ended up there were rarely seen again, the prison turned out to be the place from where Joseph emerged as that shooting star that he had seen himself in his dreams. And the expertise that helped him rise to the top was the one that he had been practicing from his youth: that with dreams. One day, two high officials landed in prison, and just as anyone else, they themselves had dreams:

Some time after this, the cupbearer of the king of Egypt and his baker offended their lord the king of Egypt. Pharaoh was angry with his two officers, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker, and he put them in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, in the prison where Joseph was confined. The captain of the

guard charged Joseph with them, and he waited on them; and they continued for some time in custody. One night they both dreamed – the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt, who were confined in the prison – each his own dream, and each dream with its own meaning. When Joseph came to them in the morning, he saw that they were troubled. So he asked Pharaoh's officers, who were with him in custody in his master's house, "Why are your faces downcast today?" They said to him, "We have had dreams, and there is no one to interpret them." And Joseph said to them, "Do not interpretations belong to God? Please tell them to me" (Gen 40:1–8).

Let us notice that Joseph does not claim that dreams are sent by God; he only claims that the interpretations come from God.

So the chief cupbearer told his dream to Joseph, and said to him, "In my dream there was a vine before me, and on the vine there were three branches. As soon as it budded, its blossoms came out and the clusters ripened into grapes. Pharaoh's cup was in my hand; and I took the grapes and pressed them into Pharaoh's cup, and placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand." Then Joseph said to him, "This is its interpretation: the three branches are three days; within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your office; and you shall place Pharaoh's cup in his hand, just as you used to do when you were his cupbearer. But remember me when it is well with you; please do me the kindness to make mention of me to Pharaoh, and so get me out of this place. For in fact I was stolen out of the land of the Hebrews; and here also I have done nothing that they should have put me into the dungeon." When the chief baker saw that the interpretation was favorable, he said to Joseph, "I also had a dream: there were three cake baskets on my head, and in the uppermost basket there were all sorts of baked food for Pharaoh, but the birds were eating it out of the basket on my head." And Joseph answered, "This is its interpretation: the three baskets are three days; within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head – from you! – and hang you on a pole; and the birds will eat the flesh from you" (Gen 40:9–19).

Again, let us notice that Joseph does not claim that he received any interpretation from God since as soon as he learned about each dream, he came up with the interpretation. Moreover, the interpretation that he provides is quite straightforward: the cupbearer does in the dream exactly what he had been doing before he was placed in prison, while the chief baker is not doing what he used to do. We are not told what each official had done that offended the monarch, and while they were in Joseph's care, no doubt Joseph had plenty of opportunities to learn about their backgrounds including the crimes they were charged with, just as he himself informed them that he was a Hebrew slave that had been placed in prison for a crime that he did not commit. But even if the two prisoners had kept their crimes secret, they themselves knew the reasons for which they had been placed behind bars, and often dreams reflect fears or hopes that people nurture based on what they know. If the cupbearer knew that he was the victim of a conspiracy by which one of his subordinates wanted his boss to be dismissed on some false charges so that he would be promoted and take his place, then obviously the cupbearer prayed to his god(s) and hoped that eventually the monarch would discover

the conspiracy and instead of promoting the conspirator, would punish him as being dangerous and reinstate his former cupbearer who had proved trustworthy. Let us keep in mind that the cup from which the monarch drank was a matter of the highest security because the easiest way in which a monarch could be killed was by poisoning and therefore the job of guarding the cup and tasting the drink in front of the monarch before handing the cup to the monarch was given to the persons that was considered the most trustworthy. If a monarch could be fooled by a conspirator to replace an incorruptible cupbearer with the conspirator, then the monarch would offer a conspirator the ideal opportunity to kill the monarch. If the cupbearer, however, knew that he was the victim of a conspiracy, he knew that the ultimate target was not himself but the monarch, and if the monarch was stupid enough to promote the conspirator, soon the monarch himself would be dead and he not only would be released from prison as innocent, but whoever would be the new monarch, would not appoint as cupbearer the conspirator who could do the same to anyone, but the previous cupbearer who had proved to be trustworthy. If the monarch, however, is wise enough to investigate and get to the bottom of the whole scheme, he would discover that the cupbearer is innocent and would have every interest to have him back as cupbearer and not someone else, and again, he would be out of prison soon. Knowing himself to be innocent, obviously he hoped and dreamed that one-day justice would prevail and he would be out of prison. That Joseph saw a parallel between the case of the cupbearer and his own he makes clear by telling the cupbearer that he himself was an inmate who had been placed behind bars on false charges and asks the cupbearer to use his position with the monarch to have his case reviewed, probably counting on the fact that the woman who placed him behind bars no doubt messed up with other slaves, she was the talk of the town, but no official wanted to look into Joseph's case because Potiphar was under his wife's boot and pretended that he did not see anything. After all, if he really believed that Joseph tried to rape his wife who was a saint as she pretended, why did he sent Joseph to prison and did not chop off his head instead as it was the rule for slaves who committed even less serious crimes? Although the dream of the chief baker seems to be very similar, the key detail is radically different: instead of the monarch benefiting from his services, it is wild animals that he is feeding. Since humans do not feed wild animals, the only way in which humans can provide food for such animals is when they die and scavengers feed on their carcasses. If the chief baker knew that he was not innocent and most likely was part of that conspiracy to remove the cupbearer in order to eventually remove the monarch, then he had every reason to go to bed and have nightmares that that conspiracy would come to light, either because it succeeds and the monarch ends up dead, or because it is investigated and uncovered so that his participation in it and his imprisonment turned into capital punishment. The punishment for conspirators was not just death, but exposing the body to be eaten by scavengers. Since Joseph knew from his own experience that dreams were just mirrors

of inner hopes, ambitions, and fears, any wonder that he could tell immediately after hearing the dreams what they meant without the need to inquire any deity? At this point I imagine that both fundamentalist and *critical* scholars jump through the roof that, although Joseph could have been able to understand the meaning of the dreams without any supernatural power, he was able to tell that those interpretations would prove true after three days and that is not something that he could have figured out using his brains unless a supernatural power had revealed it to him. What both fundamentalist and *critical* scholars forget is that in ancient writing numbers are not used to indicate quantities, but rather to convey ideas, and this is the reason why in those writings only some numbers are used and those are used over and over again. As we noticed when the Greek mythology was discussed, the numeric pattern that was used to represent a whole action was nine-and-ten, while in Gilgamesh, the pattern was six-and-seven, with three as being the half of seven. In ancient writings, seven and ten represent an action that is carried up to its final conclusion, while six and nine represent an action that is carried out for some time but has not reached its conclusion. Similarly, three represents an action that is only part of a broader action that would be described by using the number seven. If the author of Genesis had been asked how long purging the whole conspiracy lasted if investigating the two officials took three days, no doubt he would have replied: "Seven days, of course!".

As it is often the case, the cupbearer forgot about Joseph after he resumed his important position, probably thinking that after all, Joseph did not provide him with any help since Joseph did not tell him what he would have not known himself, but what saved Joseph was again some dreams, this time, dreamed by Pharaoh himself:

After two whole years, Pharaoh dreamed that he was standing by the Nile, and there came up out of the Nile seven sleek and fat cows, and they grazed in the reed grass. Then seven other cows, ugly and thin, came up out of the Nile after them, and stood by the other cows on the bank of the Nile. The ugly and thin cows ate up the seven sleek and fat cows. And Pharaoh awoke. Then he fell asleep and dreamed a second time; seven ears of grain, plump and good, were growing on one stalk. Then seven ears, thin and blighted by the east wind, sprouted after them. The thin ears swallowed up the seven plump and full ears. Pharaoh awoke, and it was a dream. In the morning his spirit was troubled; so he sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt and all its wise men. Pharaoh told them his dreams, but there was no one who could interpret them to Pharaoh (Gen 41:1–8).

Just as it was in the case of Joseph's dreams whose meaning his brothers could not fail to understand, so also in the case of Pharaoh's dreams, the meaning is so straightforward that one can hardly misunderstand them. As the ruler of an empire as a garden of Eden or what today would be called a *consumer society*, Pharaoh was obsessed to make sure that his subjects would have enough wealth to consume since it was his

responsibility to make sure that the abundance was always available, abundance that included primarily food. Cereals and animal products are the main components of human diet with the wheat representing the main farm products and cows as the main source of dairy products. Moreover, the cows and the wheat plants came from the Nile because in Egypt, the Nile was the main source of water that nurtured both the cultivated fields as well as the pastures. Since the dreams portrayed animals and plants that are first well nurtured and then unproductive, the no-brainer meaning was that the period of abundant food would be followed by a period of shortages. In subsistence economies families see themselves as the source of what they consume and they do not blame shortages on the ruler because they do not expect from the rulers anything anyway, since they know that rulers always take something from them and never gives them anything. In gardens of Eden or modern consumer societies like the western societies, however, where the ruler is viewed as the source of everything that the society consumes, from creating jobs, providing abundant salaries, providing early retirement with good pensions, offering healthcare, security, and so on, any shortages are viewed as a failure of the ruler and therefore reason for the subordinates to replace their worship for the ruler with complaints and rebellion. This is the nightmare of all monarchs who rule over gardens of Eden or consumer societies and is there any wonder that American presidents age quickly after only a few years in office? Although Pharaoh, just like American and European rulers, knew that it was his responsibility to make sure that the abundance flowed into his country from other places, they also knew that their citizens could always consume faster than the abundance that they bring into the country by robbing it from other countries, so that shortages are inevitable as the society becomes more *civilized* since the level of *civilization* is measured precisely by how much citizens are able to consume and not how much they produce. This is the nightmare of all rulers over *civilized* societies and although mass media never ask American and European rulers what dreams or nightmares they have when they go to bed, there is no doubt that they are people with some of the most troubled sleep and that explains why they gray so quickly. That Pharaoh himself did not fail to understand that the dreams confirmed his worst worries is proved by the fact that he was very troubled by the dreams, otherwise, if he had not been able to understand them, he would have been just puzzled and not worried, and most likely would have ignored them. If he himself, however, understood the meaning of the dreams, why did he ask for his experts to provide an explanation? What is even more surprising, is that the experts proved to be so dumb that they could not explain something that was a no-brainer. Ancient readers, however, would have understood that the experts played dumb not because they did not understand the meaning of the dreams, but because confirming what Pharaoh himself understood would have implied a death sentence. To tell the monarch bad news regularly implied capital punishment for the one who conveyed such news. The reason biblical prophets were often punished and even killed

was because dared to predict bad things for the monarch. The Egyptian magicians were no prophets so they could tell easily what the monarch wanted to hear and therefore they could have tried to interpret the dreams so that they predicted something good, but the reason they did not try was because Derrida was born too late and they did not know how to deconstruct something so that it would tell exactly the opposite of what everyone understood. Failing to come up with a different interpretation than the one that was so obvious, their only option was to play dumb. Enters Joseph! Before he has the chance to hear the dreams, he assured Pharaoh that he would not provide just the interpretation, but the “answer” or the solution to his problem, and that “answer” does not come from him, but from God himself: “And Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘I have had a dream, and there is no one who can interpret it. I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it.’ Joseph answered Pharaoh, ‘It is not I; God will give Pharaoh a *favorable answer* [emphasis mine]’” (Gen 41:15–16). Just as we are familiar by now, after hearing the dreams, Joseph does not ask for a timeout to check with his god to find out the interpretation of the dream, but goes ahead and tells the monarch the bad news, and how the bad news can be good news for him:

Now therefore let Pharaoh select a man who is discerning and wise, and set him over the land of Egypt. Let Pharaoh proceed to appoint overseers over the land, and take one-fifth of the produce of the land of Egypt during the seven plenteous years. Let them gather all the food of these good years that are coming, and lay up grain under the authority of Pharaoh for food in the cities, and let them keep it. That food shall be a reserve for the land against the seven years of famine that are to befall the land of Egypt, so that the land may not perish through the famine (Gen 41–36).

Famine and shortages may be bad news for the people but they can be great opportunities for despots to increase their power if they are smart about how to use the crises and the suffering of the people to bring them and keep them under control. Although Pharaoh did not have the wisdom about how to control people, all that Pharaoh needed was one man who had that wisdom, and since all the wise men of Egypt were already in front of him and had proved clueless, the only option Pharaoh had to find such a man was to pick the one who was in front of him. What did Joseph know that Pharaoh did not? Apparently, Pharaoh thought that the more he would bring spoil and tribute from other countries for his citizens to consume and enjoy, the more he would be appreciated, but he realized that the ability of his citizens to consume soon exceeds his ability to plunder and sooner than later people would start to grumble that their ruler was not up to his task. That realization was precisely the source of his dreams and nightmares. What Joseph knew was that what brings people to worship their rulers is not abundance, but suffering and shortages because it is suffering and shortages that makes people aware that they depend on their despot and then are willing to worship their despot in order to get what they need. Therefore, what Pharaoh

had to do was just to achieve control over what people needed, and then, they will all be at his feet to get what they needed. Consequently, a famine in the land not only would not be bad news for the monarch, but is the golden opportunity for him to be worshipped as a savior. All that Pharaoh needed to do was to create reserves of food in the time of plenty and then provide food when a famine came. Why lose sleep that a famine might come when you can pray for a famine to come and then go to bed, have a sweet sleep that the famine would come, get up in the morning refreshed and thank the gods that they have answered your prayer? And if the famine does not come, why not crate it? When you start to buy large quantities of food, then the price of food goes up and some people can no longer afford to buy it. As the price of food skyrockets, fewer people can afford it and eventually a large part of the population is starving although you have huge quantities of food. When people are starving, what option do they have but to sell everything they have and at the prices that you decide for the food that you offer them? Is it any wonder that Pharaoh found the idea brilliant:

The proposal pleased Pharaoh and all his servants. Pharaoh said to his servants, "Can we find anyone else like this – one in whom is the spirit of God?" So Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has shown you all this, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command; only with regard to the throne will I be greater than you" (Gen 41:37–40).

As one would expect, when people started to starve, they went to Pharaoh to ask for food only for the Pharaoh to tell them: "Go to Joseph; what he says to you, do" (Gen 41:55). And what Joseph told them, was to bring their money if they wanted food: "Joseph collected all the money to be found in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan, in exchange for the grain that they bought; and Joseph brought the money into Pharaoh's house" (Gen 47:14). Does it mean that Joseph sold the wheat at the prices that he paid when he bought it? Not necessarily, because we learn that after the Egyptians ran out of money, Joseph did not run out of wheat:

When the money from the land of Egypt and from the land of Canaan was spent, all the Egyptians came to Joseph, and said, "Give us food! Why should we die before your eyes? For our money is gone." And Joseph answered, "Give me your livestock, and I will give you food in exchange for your livestock, if your money is gone." So they brought their livestock to Joseph; and Joseph gave them food in exchange for the horses, the flocks, the herds, and the donkeys. That year he supplied them with food in exchange for all their livestock." (Gen 47:15–17).

After the Egyptians lost all their money and all their livestock Joseph still had plenty of food because next we read:

When that year was ended, they came to him the following year, and said to him, "We can not hide from my lord that our money is all spent; and the herds of cattle are my lord's. There is nothing left in the sight of my lord but our bodies

and our lands. Shall we die before your eyes, both we and our land? Buy us and our land in exchange for food. We with our land will become slaves to Pharaoh; just give us seed, so that we may live and not die, and that the land may not become desolate." So Joseph bought all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh. All the Egyptians sold their fields, because the famine was severe upon them; and the land became Pharaoh's. As for the people, he made slaves of them from one end of Egypt to the other (Gen 47:18–21).

After Joseph acquired everything that the Egyptians had, now he gave them seeds and made them work on their former lands but on his own terms:

Then Joseph said to the people, "Now that I have this day bought you and your land for Pharaoh, here is seed for you; sow the land. And at the harvests you shall give one-fifth to Pharaoh, and four-fifths shall be your own, as seed for the field and as food for yourselves and your households, and as food for your little ones." They said, "You have saved our lives; may it please my lord, we will be slaves to Pharaoh." So Joseph made it a statute concerning the land of Egypt, and it stands to this day, that Pharaoh should have the fifth. The land of the priests alone did not become Pharaoh's (Gen 47:23–26).

As a result of the famine, the Egyptians ended up working on their own fields but not as free citizens, but as slaves, and had to give to Joseph 20% of their produce for free without Joseph moving a finger. What is more, the Egyptians did not feel that they had been robbed of everything they had, but that they had been "saved" by Joseph and regarded him as their savior and not as their exploiter. At this point I imagine that both fundamentalist and *critical* scholars would jump through the roof that there was nothing immoral about what Joseph did since he used his special relationship with God to anticipate the disaster that God had decided to bring upon the land and devised a solution that eventually saved all the population of Egypt and of the Middle East from starvation. True, the population may have ended up being deprived of everything they had, even of their freedom, but, thanks to Joseph, they were alive and rightfully worshipped him as their savior since this was a natural disaster.

But was it? Both fundamentalist and *critical* scholars assume that the famine in such a large area was the result of a lack of rain and it just happened that for seven years in a row there was no rain in Egypt and in Palestine. Although it may be true that in Palestine the main source of water is rain and the amount of rain fluctuates from one year to another so that occasional famines do occur in that area, that is not true about Egypt where the main source of water for agriculture is the Nile, one of the largest rivers in the world and as it is the case with all large rivers, their flow does not depend much on the rain. As the dreams of Pharaoh made clear, the wheat plants and the cows came from the Nile and there is no suggestion in the dreams that the reason the cows and the wheat plants were inadequate was because the Nile had run dry for seven years in a row. What was the cause of the famine Joseph suggested to his brothers when he

made himself known to them: “For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be *neither plowing* nor harvest [emphasis mine]” (Gen 45:6). Even if Joseph knew that there would be no harvest for five more years because he knew that God would not send rain for five more years, why would the Egyptians not do any plowing for the next five years particularly if there had been drought for two years and after such a long and severe drought one would have expected any time not only some rain, but even flooding? If there was no plowing, how could there be any harvest even if there were plenty of rain and irrigation water? And I am sure that both fundamentalist and *critical* scholars would jump through the roof that there was no plowing because Joseph told the Egyptians that there would be no rain and plowing would be just a waste of labor and of seeds, but if that is the case, the famine was the result of not cultivating fields as a result of an agricultural policy decided by Joseph that had nothing to do with the weather since Egypt did not depend on weather for irrigation. And if it is true that the failure of the crops was the result of the fact that the Egyptians no longer cultivated their fields, how could Joseph persuade them to do what he told them? The answer must have to do with the huge quantities of food that he had amassed. Where there is so much food around and you have plenty of money, why sweat to work your fields when you can get your food just by swiping a credit card through a machine? And after you run out of money, why use your horses, your donkeys, and your animals to work the fields and produce your own food when you can give them away and have in exchange the food that you need when there is food already produced and waiting to be consumed? And after you get rid of your animals, why do you need those fields that are laying fallow and not get rid of them and then have food without moving a finger? And after you no longer have anything to sell, why not sell yourself if someone is stupid enough to give a damn on you since you yourself did not cost you anything and the one who owns you would discover that he has to feed you? Contrary to what liberationists palaver in universities, slavery has its own attractions, particularly for people who find it hard to survive or earn a living on their own. With the exception when people were conquered and then turned into slaves, most slavery has been voluntary. Although slave traffickers got money from those to whom they sold the slaves, modern traffickers are paid by the slaves themselves, except they are no longer called slaves, but rather illegal immigrants. The reason people leave their native country and go to countries that are viewed as Gardens of Eden is because they feel that they cannot survive in their own country while accepting to do the hardest work in *civilized* countries for a symbolic salary that would not only enable them to survive, but even to afford a living above of what they would be able to have in their native country. This does not mean that the citizens are not basically slaves, except they are slaves of the government. True, they may have some *rights* or privileges that the immigrants do not have, but ultimately, they depend on the government that has the responsibility to provide them with jobs and then provide

them through salaries with a decent living that usually goes beyond what they produce because most of what is produced is accomplished by the slaves or the immigrants. The Egyptians who ended up paying 20% of their produce to Joseph did not feel that Joseph was robbing them of something that was theirs but rather that if they were able to survive and enjoy the 80% of what they produced was because Joseph was wise and gracious to allow them to work the fields just as American and Europeans do not feel that the taxes that they pay to their governments are just their money that the government officials use as parasites, but rather that, if they have a job, it is because the government is gracious to give them something to work and provide them with a salary because otherwise they would not be able to produce anything and earn a living. Any wonder that Pharaoh discovered that Joseph was very wise and appointed him to be the *de facto* ruler of the country:

So Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has shown you all this, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command; only with regard to the throne will I be greater than you." And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt." Removing his signet ring from his hand, Pharaoh put it on Joseph's hand; he arrayed him in garments of fine linen, and put a gold chain around his neck. He had him ride in the chariot of his second-in-command; and they cried out in front of him, "Bow the knee!" Thus he set him over all the land of Egypt. Moreover Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I am Pharaoh, and without your consent no one shall lift up hand or foot in all the land of Egypt" (Gen 41:39-44)."

There was nothing that Joseph loved more than seeing people on their knees bowing down before him! Power, however, went hand in hand with religion because, after all, it was religion that was the science of teaching people to bow down on their knees, to prostrate themselves, and to worship. Since Joseph was no longer a youngster by now and it was time to marry, he married one of the most eligible ladies in the country, that is, the daughter of the high priest: "And Pharaoh called Joseph's name Zaph'enath-pane'ah; and he gave him in marriage As'enath, the daughter of Poti'phera priest of On. So Joseph went out over the land of Egypt" (Gen 41:45). Did Joseph find any conflict between his religion and the religion of his wife and that of his father-in-law?

Apparently not! True, Joseph could not have married a granddaughter of Laban, but why did he have to marry the daughter of a pagan priest? Is it conceivable that a Jewish leader would marry the daughter of an ayatollah, although Judaism and Islamism are very similar religions unlike the biblical religion and the Egyptian paganism? Unlike their ancestors, Joseph and his brothers no longer had the option to go back to Haran to marry women from what both fundamentalist and *critical* scholars consider holy stock since Laban and Jacob took this oath when they separated: "Then Laban said to Jacob, 'See this heap and the pillar, which I have set between you and me. This heap is a witness, and the pillar is a witness, that I will not pass over this heap to you, and you will not pass over this heap and this pillar to me, for harm'" (Gen 31:51-52). No matter

how smart Laban considered himself, he realized that Abraham's descendants could outsmart him and decided that the wise thing to do was to never have anything to do with those descendants. Therefore, the options that Jacob's sons had was to marry daughters of those evil Canaanites or Egyptians. We are not told whom each of the twelve sons married, but we are told that Joseph, the captain of Rachel's army, married an Egyptian, and Judah, the captain of Lea's army, married a Canaanite woman:

It happened at that time that Judah went down from his brothers, and turned in to a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah. There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua; he married her and went in to her, and she conceived and bore a son, and he called his name Er. Again she conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Onan. Yet again she bore a son, and she called his name Shelah. She was in Chezib when she bore him (Gen 38:1-5).

The reason we are given a detailed description of Judah's marriage is no doubt because the author of Genesis wanted to suggest that this marriage experience was typical for all the other brothers since Judah came to be viewed as their leader. And because such a holy man had to marry an evil Canaanite woman, his life was miserable, right? Well, not quite, because we are not told that the wife made life miserable for Judah, for Jacob, or for Lea. Judah not only had to marry a Canaanite woman, but he also had to choose a Canaanite woman for his older son when it was time for him to marry: "And Judah took a wife for Er his first-born, and her name was Tamar" (Gen 38:6). Within this marriage, the evil one was ... surprise, surprise, ... not the Canaanite woman, but the proud descendant of Abraham: "But Er, Judah's first-born, was wicked in the sight of the LORD; and the LORD slew him" (Gen 38:7). As it was customary at that time, when an older brother died without children, a younger brother had the responsibility to marry the widow and the child born would not be considered his own child but the child of the deceased brother. Consequently, next we read:

Then Judah said to Onan, "Go in to your brother's wife, and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother." But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his; so when he went in to his brother's wife he spilled the semen on the ground, lest he should give offspring to his brother. And what he did was displeasing in the sight of the LORD, and he slew him also (Gen 38:8-10).

The reason Onan did not want to impregnate his brother's wife was because he knew that the son who would be born would be his brother's son and that son would inherit the whole property of Er. Since Er was firstborn, he was entitled to inherit a double portion from the parental property, which in this case would have been half. Without a descendant and being dead, Er would inherit nothing, Onan would become the firstborn and entitled to two thirds of the property, that is, more than half, while if he had provided a descendant for Er, he would have inherited just a quarter of the

property. Why provide your firstborn brother with a descendant and reduce your inheritance to a quarter when you can have more than half? Where did we hear about this issue about inheritance before? Does it ring a bell? And this time it is not about brothers who are born from slave women, but brothers who are born from the same mother, and if they were killed because they themselves were evil and not because their Canaanite mother was evil, where did they learn that evilness but inherited it from their grandmothers from Haran? Judah, however, probably thinking that his sons died not because of their own inherited evilness but because they married an evil Canaanite woman, he sent the widow back to her father with the promise that when his third son would reach marriageable age, he would give her in marriage to him, although apparently he thought that it was the evil woman who was the cause of the misfortune of his sons and not their own evilness: "Then Judah said to Tamar his daughter-in-law, 'Remain a widow in your father's house, till Shelah my son grows up' – for he feared that he would die, like his brothers. So Tamar went and dwelt in her father's house" (Gen 38:11). Meanwhile, Judah himself became a widower, and when Tamar learned that he would be in the area, she disguised herself as a prostitute and enticed Judah to sleep with her not before acquiring his staff and his signet as a down payment for the service. As one would expect, Tamar remained pregnant, and when her condition became public, Judah became indignant and decided that his daughter-in-law should be punished for having had illicit sex while being officially married to his son. The standard punishment for such a crime was being killed, either by stoning or by burning: "About three months later Judah was told, 'Tamar your daughter-in-law has played the harlot; and moreover she is with child by harlotry.' And Judah said, 'Bring her out, and let her be burned'" (Gen 38:24). How else can holy people react when evil is committed but with holy indignation? As one would expect, the evil Canaanite woman produced what today would be the identity documents of the one who was the author of her pregnancy, and eventually Judah had to admit:

As she was being brought out, she sent word to her father-in-law, "By the man to whom these belong, I am with child." And she said, "Mark, I pray you, whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff." Then Judah acknowledged them and said, "She is more righteous than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah." (Gen 38:25–26).

An evil Canaanite woman "more righteous" than a descendant of Abraham through whom God wanted to bless the whole world? And if a Canaanite woman was more righteous than the one who would become the representative of all descendants of Abraham, how righteous were the others brothers of Judah? Although we are not told what happened to Shelah, through his daughter-in-law Judah did get more offspring:

When the time of her delivery came, there were twins in her womb. And when she was in labor, one put out a hand; and the midwife took and bound on his

hand a scarlet thread, saying, "This came out first." But as he drew back his hand, behold, his brother came out; and she said, "What a breach you have made for yourself!" Therefore his name was called Perez. Afterward his brother came out with the scarlet thread upon his hand; and his name was called Zerah (Gen 38:27–30).

When did we hear before about two brothers who were fighting which one to come out first from their mother's womb in order to be the one who was *blessed*? Does it ring a bell? Are we not back to square one, to Esau and Jacob, except now, the second one did not come out with his hand just holding the first one from the heel indicating that he wanted to be the first, but this time, the second one was even more ambitious because he even managed to get out his hand first? Do we need the author of Genesis to waste manuscript real-estate to tell us an even more mouth-watering version of the story about Jacob and Esau? Any wonder that the name of this son was called not just a trickster, but a downright "breach"? The champion of Lea's army was producing mighty descendants to carry on the fights of the Lord just as Joseph, the champion of Rachel's camp was producing in Egypt equally mighty descendants to carry on the same fights of the Lord because Joseph himself had also two sons:

Before the year of famine came, Joseph had two sons, whom As'enath, the daughter of Poti'phera priest of On, bore to him. Joseph called the name of the first-born Manas'seh, "For," he said, "God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house." The name of the second he called E'phraim, "For God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction" (Gen 41:50–52)."

Although Joseph's sons were not twins and did not have to fight with one another which one to come out first from their mother's womb, it does not mean that the first one was necessarily *blessed*. Although Joseph was not the firstborn son of Jacob, he was the firstborn son of Rachel, and because Jacob considered Rachel his favorite wife although she was not technically his first wife, before he died he blessed not only Joseph, but his sons as well, basically adopting them and reaching the magical number thirteen, the number that indicates the boss at the top of the pyramid. Although Jacob blessed both sons of Joseph, does it mean that both sons were equally *blessed* or that the firstborn was more blessed? Not necessarily, because about this blessing we read:

And Joseph took them both, E'phraim in his right hand toward Israel's left hand, and Manas'seh in his left hand toward Israel's right hand, and brought them near him. And Israel stretched out his right hand and laid it upon the head of E'phraim, who was the younger, and his left hand upon the head of Manas'seh, crossing his hands, for Manas'seh was the first-born. And he blessed Joseph, and said, "The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has led me all my life long to this day, the angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads; and in them let my name [שְׁמִי, *šēmî/ Shemi*] be perpetuated, and the name [שֵׁם, *šēm/Shem*] of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth." When Joseph saw that his father laid his right hand upon the head of E'phraim, it displeased him; and he took his

father's hand, to remove it from E'phraim's head to Manas'seh's head. And Joseph said to his father, "Not so, my father; for this one is the first-born; put your right hand upon his head." But his father refused, and said, "I know, my son, I know; he also shall become a people, and he also shall be great; nevertheless his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his descendants shall become a multitude of nations." So he blessed them that day, saying, "By you Israel will pronounce blessings, saying, God make you as E'phraim and as Manas'seh"; and thus he put E'phraim before Manas'seh (Gen 48:13–20).

Since Jacob lived all his life with that obsession that his name/Shem should be at the top of the staircase that reached the heaven that was the Tower of Babel envisioned by the drunkard Noah, is there any wonder that on his deathbed there was nothing else on his mind but which one of his descendants should be *blessed* with the mission to put his name there? Taking into account that Jacob was virtually blind, both fundamentalist and *critical* scholars assume that Jacob was miraculously directed by God to bless the younger son although Jacob did not know which son was the firstborn, but there is no need to imagine any magic. Since Jacob knew that Joseph as the firstborn and the one who was *blessed* would place his own firstborn at the right hand of Jacob to be blessed, Jacob decided to cross his hands to bless the younger son to legitimize his own *blessing* as the second son whom God preferred. Of course, Joseph thought that Jacob was not aware that he was breaking the rules and tried to correct his father, but Jacob replied that he was aware of what he was doing and was doing it on purpose because that is precisely how he himself got *blessed*. The rule of blessing the firstborn made the firstborn privileged without the firstborn to do anything to deserve the merit while the one who is not the firstborn felt to be the underdog and had to fight with the privileged sibling to get the upper hand. And this fight between siblings originated with Sarah and her slave woman and is a fight that is carried on through the whole of Genesis as even commentators admit:

In terms of form, scholars have described the story as a "conflict narrative," centering on a conflict between two women, Sarai and Hagar. The nature of this conflict has been much debated in recent years, not least by feminist scholars, who have provided much insight into the text. At the same time, the conflict should be more broadly conceived in terms of the family of Abraham. This text must be placed within the whole of Genesis, which reveals, in contemporary terms, a highly dysfunctional family system in which individuals – both male and female – are caught up in swirls of dissension beyond their own making or ability to control. This text narrates, fundamentally, a family problem. Yet, because the story occurs in a patriarchal system, the males involved deserve special blame, and this does not go entirely unrecognized by the narrator.⁶

⁶ *The New Interpreter's Bible: General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for Each Book of the Bible, Including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical book* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 1:451.

The “insights” that the feminist scholars have brought to the text must be the idea that for the conflict between the two women, responsible was Abraham since it was a “patriarchal system” when the men automatically get the blame for everything that happens, including what women themselves do. Since whatever Abraham did was decided by Sarah and whatever Sarah decided was carried on by her descendants, if all those descendants had families that were dysfunctional, then that dysfunctionality must be traced back to the original family. Indeed, what we noticed in the families of Isaac and Jacob were behaviors that were copycats of what Abraham and Sarah did.

Although Jacob’s sons no longer married women from Sarah’s family in Haran, they all had dysfunctional families with behaviors inspired by their mothers. The story about Judah and Tamar is clearly intended to illustrate what was typical of all these families, but is not the only one. Although in the story about Judah only two of his sons die and Tamar is close to being burned alive, another story about Judah’s brothers ended up in mass murder. What is unusual about these stories about patriarchs is that although women fight to get children, they all end up being boys, with only one exception: Lea at one point gives birth to a girl called Dina. Since Dina could not marry her brothers and could not go back to Haran to marry a grandson of Laban from the holy stock due to the oath taken by Jacob and Laban never to have dealings again, what were her options? Apparently, she befriended some women from the area, but not being a lesbian, probably her interest was not primarily in women:

Now Dinah the daughter of Leah, whom she had borne to Jacob, went out to visit the women of the region. When Shechem son of Hamor the Hivite, prince of the region, saw her, he seized her and lay with her by force. And his soul was drawn to Dinah daughter of Jacob; he loved the girl, and spoke tenderly to her. So Shechem spoke to his father Hamor, saying, “Get me this girl to be my wife.” Now Jacob heard that Shechem had defiled his daughter Dinah; but his sons were with his cattle in the field, so Jacob held his peace until they came. And Hamor the father of Shechem went out to Jacob to speak with him, just as the sons of Jacob came in from the field. When they heard of it, the men were indignant and very angry, because he had committed an outrage in Israel by lying with Jacob’s daughter, for such a thing ought not to be done. But Hamor spoke with them, saying, “The heart of my son Shechem longs for your daughter; please give her to him in marriage. Make marriages with us; give your daughters to us, and take our daughters for yourselves. You shall live with us; and the land shall be open to you; live and trade in it, and get property in it.” Shechem also said to her father and to her brothers, “Let me find favor with you, and whatever you say to me I will give. Put the marriage present and gift as high as you like, and I will give whatever you ask me; only give me the girl to be my wife” (Gen 34:1–12).

Was this an ancient version of Romeo and Juliet? Well, not quite, because next we read:

The sons of Jacob answered Shechem and his father Hamor deceitfully, because he had defiled their sister Dinah. They said to them, “We cannot do this thing, to give our sister to one who is uncircumcised, for that would be a disgrace to us.

Only on this condition will we consent to you: that you will become as we are and every male among you be circumcised. Then we will give our daughters to you, and we will take your daughters for ourselves, and we will live among you and become one people. But if you will not listen to us and be circumcised, then we will take our daughter and be gone." Their words pleased Hamor and Hamor's son Shechem. And the young man did not delay to do the thing, because he was delighted with Jacob's daughter. Now he was the most honored of all his family. So Hamor and his son Shechem came to the gate of their city and spoke to the men of their city, saying, "These people are friendly with us; let them live in the land and trade in it, for the land is large enough for them; let us take their daughters in marriage, and let us give them our daughters. Only on this condition will they agree to live among us, to become one people: that every male among us be circumcised as they are circumcised. Will not their livestock, their property, and all their animals be ours? Only let us agree with them, and they will live among us." And all who went out of the city gate heeded Hamor and his son Shechem; and every male was circumcised, all who went out of the gate of his city (Gen 34:13–24).

Did a wedding follow with the new couple living happily thereafter? Well, not quite, because this is what happened next:

On the third day, when they were still in pain, two of the sons of Jacob, Simeon and Levi, Dinah's brothers, took their swords and came against the city unawares, and killed all the males. They killed Hamor and his son Shechem with the sword, and took Dinah out of Shechem's house, and went away. And the other sons of Jacob came upon the slain, and plundered the city, because their sister had been defiled. They took their flocks and their herds, their donkeys, and whatever was in the city and in the field. All their wealth, all their little ones and their wives, all that was in the houses, they captured and made their prey (Gen 34:25–29).

Is this just a dysfunctional family or is it a family of some of the most ruthless bandits? If Jacob's sons wanted to punish the rapist, why did they kill all the male population of the city and then plundered everything from the city? And if they were so indignant about what Shechem did, why did they agree to the marriage and then they changed their minds? Or did they have minds of their own or was someone else who had full control over their minds? So appalled was even Jacob about what happened that he decided to pack everything and run away from the area, and let us keep in mind that Jacob was not so easily impressed by cruelties since he could have watched in cold blood his brother Esau starve to death rather than give him a dish of vegetable stew. So appalled was Jacob by this family episode that he even mentioned it on his deathbed: "Simeon and Levi are brothers; weapons of violence are their swords. May I never come into *their council*; may I not be joined to their company – for in their anger they killed men, and at their whim they hamstrung oxen. Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce, and their wrath, for it is cruel! I will divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel [emphasis mine]" (Gen 49:5–7). Consequently, after Jacob and his sons Simeon and Levi and the Shechem's family agreed on the conditions on which the marriage would take

place, a “council” took place where the whole massacre was decided and where Jacob did not go most likely because he was not even invited, but if such a council in which Simeon and Levi participated, who else could have called on such a council but their mom, Lea? Therefore, if the marriage did not take place it was because the mom was not asked or had not given her approval, and because she was not asked, she decided to cancel what the men had agreed upon since the men dared to decide something without consulting the boss. And of course, when their mom ordered them, the boys promptly grabbed their swords in order to carry out the fights of the Lord that were the fights of their mom. But if Lea did not like the marriage, what could have been the reason? Could it be that her daughter managed to conquer the prince of the city who was considered the most eligible bachelor in that area while she only managed to marry a fugitive stinky shepherd and even that one by stealing him from her sister and then having him in bed only when her younger sister would give her permission after getting something from her in return? Is there any wonder that she was so happy to have boys since she knew that she could use them to carry out the fights of the Lord with her more successful sister, and after her sister was dead on the battle field, she could use the same boys to carry out the same fights of the Lord with her even more successful daughter? And what was the justification that the mom provided for his obedient boys when she told them to do what they did? This is what they said, no doubt parroting what their mom had put into their mouth:

Then Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, “You have brought trouble on me by making me odious to the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites and the Perizzites; my numbers are few, and if they gather themselves against me and attack me, I shall be destroyed, both I and my household.” But they said, “Should our sister be treated like a whore?” (Gen 34:30–31).

Consequently, Lea decided that Shechem was not a rapist as the feminists rant and rave, but that her daughter was a whore who seduced Shechem and his guilt was that he accepted to sleep with a whore. But was his guilt that he slept with her just as he would sleep with a whore, or was his guilt precisely that he did not sleep with her as he would sleep with a whore, pay her, and then forget about her? What the brainwashed sons did not realize when they parroted what their mom told them was that no one – particularly a prince – would want to marry a whore with whom he had intercourse, and even go to such length to arrange for the marriage unless he knew for a fact that she was not a whore since she was a virgin and was deeply in love with her. But if Lea thought that her daughter behaved like whore, she understood that Dina’s sleeping with Shechem was not only voluntary, but probably her idea, that they probably had been dating for some time, that her going out to meet with the girls in the area was just a pretext to meet with her lover, that they had been planning to get married, that Dina told him that the old hag who was her mother would never agree to the marriage unless

they slept together and then face her mother with an accomplished fact. If her mother used such a trick to marry Jacob, why she should not use something even more innocent to marry the man she loved and she knew that he loved her just as much or even more? Dina counted on the fact that even when a young lady was raped, her parents not only would agree to the marriage, but even force the rapist to marry the girl, because, even if the parents did not like the rapist, they knew that their daughter would no longer be marriageable and be able to find a husband. What Dina misjudged, however, was the callousness of her mother and that her mother would not shrink from anything to destroy her marriage just as she destroyed the marriage of her sister. Is there any wonder that we never hear of Dina again? Who would think of marrying someone with such a demonic mother?

Although we do not hear about Dina again, we do hear about Joseph again. No, it is not that he had an unhappy marriage with an Egyptian woman who was the daughter of a pagan priest so that the marriage was quite functional and Joseph's religion could be in bed very well with the paganism of his wife. Not only Joseph could function very well with a pagan wife as a family, but he was very successful as the highest royal official who managed to turn the whole country into slaves and make all the inhabitants come to him on their knees begging for food. Although it seems that Joseph managed to acquire anything that one may dream of, what bothered him was that his dreams had not really come true. As a descendant of Abraham or rather Sarah through whom God was going to bless the whole world, his dream was not just to have foreigners come down on their knees worshipping him and begging for food, but his dream was to see his own brothers do so, indeed even his parents. Therefore, he carefully looked at all those who came on their knees begging for food and sure enough, one day he saw what he was looking for:

Now Joseph was governor over the land; it was he who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brothers came and bowed themselves before him with their faces to the ground. When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them, but he treated them like strangers and spoke harshly to them. "Where do you come from?" he said. They said, "From the land of Canaan, to buy food." Although Joseph had recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him. Joseph also remembered the dreams that he had dreamed about them (Gen 42:6-9).

Finally, Joseph saw his dreams come true and was satisfied, right? Well, not quite, because he had his brothers in his claws now and he could enjoy playing with them just as a cat plays with a mouse:

He said to them, "You are spies; you have come to see the nakedness of the land!" They said to him, "No, my lord; your servants have come to buy food. We are all sons of one man; we are honest men; your servants have never been spies." But he said to them, "No, you have come to see the nakedness of the land!" They said, "We, your servants, are twelve brothers, the sons of a certain

man in the land of Canaan; the youngest, however, is now with our father, and one is no more" (Gen 42:9–13).

Is it conceivable that none of the ten brothers recognized Joseph although Joseph recognized all of them, taking into account that Joseph was separated from his brothers not when he was a child, but when he was a grownup adult? When they noticed that this Egyptian was suspecting them of being spies, they assumed that Joseph was the one who did not recognize them, and since at that time there were no passports and no identity cards, the only information that one could provide for identification was mentioning the father and the family. Realizing that mentioning their father, where they came from, and that all ten of them were a family did not jolt the memory of the Egyptian in front of them, they went into details explaining that there was another brother at home and there was also one who "is no more" because the one who "is no more" was the idiot in front of them who could not put two and two together. That by the one who "is no more" the brothers could not have meant someone who is dead since they knew very well that Joseph had been sold as a slave and had no reason to believe that he was killed, particularly now when they were talking to him. The information about the younger brother, however, instead of jolting the memory of the dumb Egyptian, provided him with the clue as to how to test the truthfulness of the suspected spies:

But Joseph said to them, "It is just as I have said to you; you are spies! Here is how you shall be tested: as Pharaoh lives, you shall not leave this place unless your youngest brother comes here! Let one of you go and bring your brother, while the rest of you remain in prison, in order that your words may be tested, whether there is truth in you; or else, as Pharaoh lives, surely you are spies." And he put them all together in prison for three days. On the third day Joseph said to them, "Do this and you will live, for I fear God: if you are honest men, let one of your brothers stay here where you are imprisoned. The rest of you shall go and carry grain for the famine of your households, and bring your youngest brother to me. Thus your words will be verified, and you shall not die." And they agreed to do so (Gen 42:14–20).

Did they have any option? Who says that it is not such a privilege to have as a brother someone who is *blessed* because he is God's favorite and who puts you behind bars for being a spy because you have confessed that you have another brother at home? Did they believe that spying was the real crime for which they were placed behind bars or did they understand what their real crime was, who was the one they were dealing with, and what kind of game this Egyptian was playing? Although they were no saints and no doubt committed many crimes, the only crime they could think of and for which they were placed now behind bars was the one that they committed against that brother who "is no more" and who looked so much like this Egyptian, and they even thought about it aloud to tell the Egyptian than now they understood the game that he was playing:

They said to one another, "Alas, we are paying the penalty for what we did to our brother; we saw his anguish when he pleaded with us, but we would not listen. That is why this anguish has come upon us." Then Reuben answered them, "Did I not tell you not to wrong the boy? But you would not listen. So now there comes a reckoning for his blood." They did not know that Joseph understood them, since he spoke with them through an interpreter. He turned away from them and wept; then he returned and spoke to them. And he picked out Simeon and had him bound before their eyes (Gen 42:21–24).

Hearing his brothers confess was a little too much even for a heart of stone but that was just a momentary weakness because Joseph regained his sternness and resumed his game. He decided to let the other brothers leave and keep only Simeon as hostage to make sure that the other brothers are still in his claws and he can play with them. The reason Joseph did not pick Reuben although he was the firstborn was no doubt because Joseph remembered that Reuben had proved less cruel than the other brothers and therefore he picked Simeon who was the next in line in terms of seniority and probably was one of those who supported the idea of killing before Joseph was sold. Joseph proved that he was not just a cat that was willing to let loose his pray, but is even generous with his pray:

Joseph then gave orders to fill their bags with grain, to return every man's money to his sack, and to give them provisions for their journey. This was done for them. When one of them opened his sack to give his donkey fodder at the lodging place, he saw his money at the top of the sack. He said to his brothers, "My money has been put back; here it is in my sack!" At this they lost heart and turned trembling to one another, saying, "What is this that God has done to us?" (Gen 42:25–28).

Did they doubt any more that their brother was a god who was playing a game with them? When they returned home, however, they discovered that they could not quite tell Jacob what they found out in Egypt:

When they came to their father Jacob in the land of Canaan, they told him all that had happened to them, saying, "The man, the lord of the land, spoke harshly to us, and charged us with spying on the land. But we said to him, 'We are honest men, we are not spies. We are twelve brothers, sons of our father; one is no more, and the youngest is now with our father in the land of Canaan.' Then the man, the lord of the land, said to us, 'By this I shall know that you are honest men: leave one of your brothers with me, take grain for the famine of your households, and go your way. Bring your youngest brother to me, and I shall know that you are not spies but honest men. Then I will release your brother to you, and you may trade in the land'" (Gen 42:29–34).

Although the sons understood very well the game that Joseph played and why he wanted so badly to see his younger brother, they could not tell Jacob what they knew and that there was no reason to be afraid that Benjamin was in any danger by going to Egypt for an emotional brotherly reunion because then they would have had to tell him

that they lied that Joseph was killed but rather that they sold him as a slave in Egypt where he miraculously had become one of the most powerful men in the country. As one would expect, the first-born Reuben steps in and makes the following offer: "You may kill my two sons if I do not bring him back to you. Put him in my hands, and I will bring him back to you" (Gen 42:37). The reason Reuben made this apparently absurd offer was precisely because he knew for sure that not only Benjamin was in no danger, but his sons would be in no danger as well. In spite of this guarantee that Reuben offers, Jacob refuses to release Benjamin: "But he said, 'My son shall not go down with you, for his brother is dead, and he alone is left. If harm should come to him on the journey that you are to make, you would bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to Sheol'" (Gen 42:38). Apparently, after Joseph disappeared because he allowed Joseph to leave the home to see his brothers pasturing the sheep, the lesson Jacob learned was not that it was wrong to favor one son anymore, but to protect him even more jealously by not allowing him to leave home anymore. The fact that another son, Simeon, was rotting in jail because Jacob did not allow his favorite son to go to Egypt did not bother Jacob a bit. Since they ran out of food, eventually Judah stepped in and made another offer:

Now the famine was severe in the land. And when they had eaten up the grain that they had brought from Egypt, their father said to them, "Go again, buy us a little more food." But Judah said to him, "The man solemnly warned us, saying, 'You shall not see my face unless your brother is with you.' If you will send our brother with us, we will go down and buy you food; but if you will not send him, we will not go down, for the man said to us, 'You shall not see my face, unless your brother is with you.'" Israel said, "Why did you treat me so badly as to tell the man that you had another brother?" They replied, "The man questioned us carefully about ourselves and our kindred, saying, 'Is your father still alive? Have you another brother?' What we told him was in answer to these questions. Could we in any way know that he would say, 'Bring your brother down?'" Then Judah said to his father Israel, "Send the boy with me, and let us be on our way, so that we may live and not die – you and we and also our little ones. I myself will be surety for him; you can hold me accountable for him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, then let me bear the blame forever (Gen 43:1–9).

What Judah could not tell Jacob was precisely that they volunteered the information about Benjamin and about the brother who "is no more" precisely in order to help Joseph recognize them. Since Joseph decided to play a game with them, now they had to play another game with Jacob, a game that they had started since they did not tell Jacob from the beginning what really happened to Joseph. We have here not just a dysfunctional family, but a family that was getting more and more entangled in its own games and where honesty had no place. Eventually, Jacob had to relent and allow Benjamin to go to Egypt. As one would expect, the meeting of the two brothers occasioned a big celebration, but not before Joseph enjoyed more playing his game of cat and mouse:

When Joseph saw Benjamin with them, he said to the steward of his house, "Bring the men into the house, and slaughter an animal and make ready, for the men are to dine with me at noon." The man did as Joseph said, and brought the men to Joseph's house. Now the men were afraid because they were brought to Joseph's house, and they said, "It is because of the money, replaced in our sacks the first time, that we have been brought in, so that he may have an opportunity to fall upon us, to make slaves of us and take our donkeys." So they went up to the steward of Joseph's house and spoke with him at the entrance to the house. They said, "Oh, my lord, we came down the first time to buy food; and when we came to the lodging place we opened our sacks, and there was each one's money in the top of his sack, our money in full weight. So we have brought it back with us. Moreover we have brought down with us additional money to buy food. We do not know who put our money in our sacks" (Gen 43:16–22).

Expecting the worst, the brothers thought that Joseph, after managing to reunite with his brother, brought them to the house in order to charge them with stealing the money so that Joseph, instead of releasing Simeon, would place all of the other brothers in jail realizing that the money had been put into their sacks by Joseph precisely to have grounds to arrest them. Therefore, they reasoned that it was better to confess to the steward in order to have at least a witness that they were honest people and had no intention to steal. The steward, however, tried to calm them down: "Rest assured, do not be afraid; your God and the God of your father must have put treasure in your sacks for you; I received your money." Then he brought Simeon out to them" (Gen 43:23). The fact that they were allowed to keep the money, was it proof that they were dealing with someone benevolent, or with someone who had an even more malefic scheme in mind?

When the steward had brought the men into Joseph's house, and given them water, and they had washed their feet, and when he had given their donkeys fodder, they made the present ready for Joseph's coming at noon, for they had heard that they would dine there. When Joseph came home, they brought him the present that they had carried into the house, and bowed to the ground before him. He inquired about their welfare, and said, "Is your father well, the old man of whom you spoke? Is he still alive?" They said, "Your servant our father is well; he is still alive." And *they bowed their heads and did obeisance*. Then *he looked up* and saw his brother Benjamin, his mother's son, and said, "Is this your youngest brother, of whom you spoke to me? God be gracious to you, my son!" With that, Joseph hurried out, because he was overcome with affection for his brother, and he was about to weep. So he went into a private room and wept there [emphasis mine] (Gen 43:24–30).

If the ten brothers were at Joseph's feet, where was Benjamin if Joseph had to "look up" to see him? That Joseph could pretend that he did not recognize his brothers whom he hated and knew that they hated him just as much is not difficult to understand, but that he pretended that he did not recognize his brother whom he longed so much to see and who no doubt recognized him as well since he did not bow down before him is hard to understand. It is the second time that this was too much even for a heart of stone so that

Joseph had to go quickly to another room to regain his royal coldness, then ordered the meal to be served:

Then he washed his face and came out; and controlling himself he said, "Serve the meal." They served him by himself, and them by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves, because the Egyptians could not eat with the Hebrews, for that is an abomination to the Egyptians. When they were seated before him, the firstborn according to his birthright and the youngest according to his youth, the men looked at one another in amazement. Portions were taken to them from Joseph's table, but Benjamin's portion was five times as much as any of theirs. So they drank and were merry with him (Gen 43:31-34).

If Joseph had to sit by himself because the Egyptians would not sit at the same table with a Hebrew, then why this dumb Egyptian would not sit at the same table with the other Hebrews if he was not an Egyptian but a Hebrew? Was this ceremony about anything else but about that *birthright!* When did we hear about this before? Does the bell keep ringing? One can imagine how the brothers struggled to get their food down their throats when they knew that they were dining with someone who kept pretending that he did not know who they were but arranged them at the table in the precise order of their age with the favorite one last and receiving five time more of everything just as they were seated at the table back home all the time with Benjamin receiving special food all the time. What more proof did they need that they were at home? And while Joseph was looking at them as if they were complete strangers whom he had never seen in his life, the brothers had to pretend that they were really happy and had the best time of their life. Could this meal be a sadistic way of punishing people by offering them a lavish meal before taking them out to the firing squad as sometimes the Nazis did with their victims? While the brothers wondered why Joseph was so generous, Joseph proved to be even more generous:

Then he commanded the steward of his house, "Fill the men's sacks with food, as much as they can carry, and put each man's money in the top of his sack. Put my cup, the silver cup, in the top of the sack of the youngest, with his money for the grain." And he did as Joseph told him. As soon as the morning was light, the men were sent away with their donkeys." (Gen 44:1-2).

Finally, the brothers were free to go on their way, but were they off the hook? What was the point of bringing the youngest brother all the way from Canaan as proof that they were not spies since a bunch of shepherds could not pose any threat to the most powerful empire at that time, offering them an abundant meal and then letting them go without any explanation and without the two brothers even to embrace each other? The most sadistic way to terrorize people is not to make them suffer, but to keep them in your power and play with them without giving them a clue as to what you have in mind. If the brothers believed that once they were on their way they were finally off the hook, they were in for a surprise:

When they had gone only a short distance from the city, Joseph said to his steward, "Go, follow after the men; and when you overtake them, say to them, 'Why have you returned evil for good? Why have you stolen my silver cup? Is it not from this that my lord drinks? Does he not indeed use it for divination? You have done wrong in doing this'" (Gen 44:4-5).

So, that's what it was? All that generosity was intended to charge them with an even more serious crime than that of spying. Convinced of their innocence, the brothers make a foolish pledge:

Look, the money that we found at the top of our sacks, we brought back to you from the land of Canaan; why then would we steal silver or gold from your lord's house? Should it be found with any one of your servants, let him *die*; moreover the rest of us will become my lord's slaves." He said, "Even so; in accordance with your words, let it be: he with whom it is found shall become my *slave*, but the rest of you shall go free [emphasis mine]" (Gen 44:8-10).

Brothers offering to become slaves to their brother? That brothers would sell one of their brothers to be a slave to strangers verges on unthinkable, but why would a brother even think to have another brother as a slave? That they had been framed all along probably they had no doubt by now and while probably they expected the cup to be found in the sack of the one who had been most active in the plot for killing Joseph, none of them expected what followed: "Then each one quickly lowered his sack to the ground, and each opened his sack. He searched, beginning with the eldest and ending with the youngest; and the cup was found in Benjamin's sack" (Gen 44:11-12). That Joseph wanted to punish his half-brothers for what they had done to him since they were involved in the plot they had understood from the beginning and that Joseph wanted to see his full brother they also understood, but why would Joseph want his full brother as a slave since he was not involved in the plot?

But was he not? It was at this point that Judah understood what was going on in that dark mind and decided to go back to Egypt and face this powerful brother head on:

At this they tore their clothes. Then each one loaded his donkey, and they returned to the city. Judah and his brothers came to Joseph's house while he was still there; and *they fell to the ground before him*. Joseph said to them, "What deed is this that you have done? Do you not know that one such as I can practice divination?" And Judah said, "What can we say to my lord? What can we speak? How can we clear ourselves? *God has found out the guilt of your servants; here we are then, my lord's slaves, both we and also the one in whose possession the cup has been found*. But he said, "Far be it from me that I should do so! Only the one in whose possession the cup was found shall be my slave; but as for you, go up in peace to your father." [emphasis mine]" (Gen 44:13-17)."

Judah understood that the whole game was about fulfilling that dream about eleven stars "falling to the ground before" the Luciferian one and the reason he wanted the last

brother to come was not because he wanted to see him, but because he could not be satisfied with only ten stars “falling to the ground before him,” but wanted all eleven stars at his feet because now Benjamin is no longer standing so that all eleven brothers are at Joseph’s feet. And Judah understood that the whole game was not about admitting the guilt of stealing the cup, but about a collective guilt because he talks about “the guilt of your servants,” and that includes all of them, and not just the one in whose sack the cup was found. And that raises the question: Why is Benjamin not exempted from this collective guilt? Could it be that Benjamin was also with the other brothers when Joseph was sold? That Joseph was kept at home as the privileged child and spared from the dirty work of tending sheep is understandable, but there is no hint that Benjamin received any favors at that time and therefore he must have been shepherding sheep along with all the other brothers. That after Joseph disappeared, Benjamin took his place as the privileged child is also understandable since he was the only child left from Jacob’s favorite wife whom he always considered his legitimate one because she was the only one whom he loved and wanted. And if that is the case, then that would explain why Benjamin took part in the plot, if not initiating it, at least passively endorsing it. Do we have again a younger brother who is the underdog and has to take away the privileges from the firstborn, although this time he does not need to force his brother to sell his privileges for a dish of vegetable stew because the half-brothers could do the dirty job for him? Does the bell keep ringing? Is there just coincidence that when it was agreed what to be done to the one in whose sack the cup would be found was first to be *killed* and then to be turned into a *slave*? Is that not precisely what happened to Joseph and is not that what Joseph wanted Benjamin to see, that is, what Joseph went through, from the decision to be killed and then to be sold as a slave, as Benjamin was sitting there and instead of telling the plotters that he would tell Jacob the truth about their crime, he was rejoicing at the thought that now he would become that *blessed* and favorite son? If that is the case, that would explain not only why Joseph wanted his brother to come and join in the act of worshipping him, but why he should be singled out to be killed first and later to be held as a slave, because that is precisely what Joseph went through, first he was sentenced to be killed, and then he was sold as a slave. Was this just a game that Joseph was playing, or did he really intend to turn Benjamin into a slave just as he himself was turned into a slave? Was any sensitivity left in that heart of stone? It was again Judah who managed to touch the only cord of humanity that was left in that heart:

Then your servant my father said to us, “You know that my wife bore me two sons; one left me, and I said, Surely he has been torn to pieces; and I have never seen him since. If you take this one also from me, and harm comes to him, you will bring down my gray hairs in sorrow to Sheol.” Now therefore, when I come to your servant my father and the boy is not with us, then, as his life is bound up in the boy’s life, when he sees that the boy is not with us, he will die; and your

servants will bring down the gray hairs of your servant our father with sorrow to Sheol (Gen 44:27–31).

There is a blackmail involved here. If Judah really believed that this Egyptian was a stranger, why mentioning his father and what would happen to the father of the slave if the boy was turned into a slave for the crime of stealing that cup? Why would this Egyptian care about what might happen to that father? Since Joseph pretended that he did not recognize his brothers, they also pretended that they did not recognize Joseph, and therefore when they returned home they did not tell Jacob that Benjamin would go to meet with his brother to set some records straight. Moreover, by repeating what Jacob said, Judah informed Joseph that they had not told Jacob the truth about what happened to Joseph and therefore Jacob knows that Joseph was killed and not that he had been sold as a slave and therefore is still alive. If Joseph sticks to his game to keep Benjamin as a slave, they are not going to tell Jacob that the Egyptian official who wanted Benjamin was actually Joseph about whom they had lied that he was killed, but that the Egyptian official wanted Benjamin to turn him into a slave for some strange reason and they could do nothing about it, and since Jacob could not live without a favorite son, he would not doubt die of broken heart. Is that what Joseph wanted? Could it be that a son whom Jacob never loved because he happened to be born from the wrong wife cared more about Joseph's father than the son whom Jacob loved like the apple of his eye? That Joseph could be as cruel as to turn a full brother into a slave now they could see, but was Joseph so callous as to not care even about what would happen to his own father who loved him so much? It was only when Joseph thought about his father that the only trace of humanity that was left in him was touched and his heart of stone melted:

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, "Send everyone away from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence. Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt" (Gen 45:1–4).

Was Joseph finally their brother? Was the family feud over and could all the brothers now reconciled go home? But where was their home? This is what Joseph decides: "Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have'" (Gen 45:9–10). Consequently, all that plot about killing and then selling Joseph was not just a demonic scheme of children fighting because their mothers were fighting and a father who liked to play favorites in the name of God, but it was God's scheme all along because God

wanted the descendants of Abraham not to end up in Canaan, but in Egypt. Quite a confused God, right? And Joseph wanted his brothers to be close to him because he wanted to use his position with Pharaoh to help them move up in the pyramid of power to see how sweet it is to be boss and see others kneel before you. Understandably, when Pharaoh learned that Joseph had a family, not only gladly gave them permission to move to the garden of Eden, but wanted to know them personally. In preparation for the meeting, this is what Joseph told his brothers to tell Pharaoh:

Joseph said to his brothers and to his father's household, "I will go up and tell Pharaoh, and will say to him, 'My brothers and my father's household, who were in the land of Canaan, have come to me. The men are shepherds, for they have been keepers of livestock; and they have brought their flocks, and their herds, and all that they have.' When Pharaoh calls you, and says, 'What is your occupation?' you shall say, 'Your servants have been keepers of livestock from our youth even until now, both we and our ancestors' – in order that you may settle in the land of Goshen, because all shepherds are abhorrent to the Egyptians" (Gen 46:31–34).

Joseph knew that this meeting between Pharaoh and his brothers was not just a photo op but was basically a job interview and knowing that he was dealing with crooks and liars, he told them that he had already submitted to Pharaoh their resumes so that they should make sure that they would confirm what Joseph had already told him and not to start to brag about imaginary skills or about how they managed to massacre a whole city singlehandedly, a skill that no doubt was very high on Pharaoh's list and for which he always had openings and room for promotions just as the American and the Europeans do. Instead, he told them to tell Pharaoh that they were what they really were, that is, stinky shepherds, a job that the Egyptians, being the most *civilized* at that time just as today Americans and Europeans are, found to be way below their dignity and would not want to have anything to do with such people just as Americans and Europeans find immigrants the scum of their nice societies. But even if it was true that his brothers were stinky shepherds, why not use this opportunity to move up on the social ladder? Could they not just take a good bath, shave themselves, put on new cloths, go through some training seminars and take some language lessons, and be assigned as supervisors on some of many Pharaoh's projects. After all, if Joseph could do it, why could not his brothers do the same? Was there no way in which those stinky shepherds could move up particularly when they had connections in the highest places? Although during the meeting the brothers responded as had been coached by Joseph, apparently Pharaoh did not think that shepherds cannot be promoted, because this is what he instructed Joseph to do: "Your father and your brothers have come to you. The land of Egypt is before you; settle your father and your brothers in the best part of the land; let them live in the land of Goshen; and if you know that there are capable men among them, put them in charge of my livestock" (Gen 47:5–6). If they could sell their

brother to be a slave and could massacre a whole city in cold blood, how could they not be “capable” of anything? In other words, if taking care of animals is the only thing they knew, why not appoint them bosses over those who took care of those stinky animals instead of letting them do the stinky job themselves, something that Egyptians did not like to do? Did Joseph promote his brothers although Pharaoh even encouraged him to do so? Nope! If those brothers started to move up on the social ladder, who guaranteed that they would still fall to the feet of their Luciferian brother? Did those brothers ever believe that their Luciferian brother forgave them and they did not need to be afraid of him anymore? Apparently not, because after Jacob died, this is what they said to Joseph:

Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph’s brothers said, “What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?” So they approached Joseph, saying, “Your father gave this instruction before he died, ‘Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.’ Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father” (Gen 60:15–17).

If one reads what Jacob said and did before he died, he never mentioned the other eleven sons, because his only concern was to get to know Joseph’s sons, to adopt them as being his own in order to reach the magical number of thirteen, to bless them, and to end up in that luxury cave where Sarah took her final residence and all her descendants followed in her footsteps, a residence that Jacob himself could not miss:

Then he charged them, saying to them, “I am about to be gathered to my people. Bury me with my ancestors – in the cave in the field of Ephron the Hittite, in the cave in the field at Machpelah, near Mamre, in the land of Canaan, in the field that Abraham bought from Ephron the Hittite as a burial site. There Abraham and his wife Sarah were buried; there Isaac and his wife Rebekah were buried; and there I buried Leah – the field and the cave that is in it were purchased from the Hittites.” ... Thus his sons did for him as he had instructed them. They carried him to the land of Canaan and buried him in the cave of the field at Machpelah, the field near Mamre, which Abraham bought as a burial site from Ephron the Hittite. After he had buried his father, Joseph returned to Egypt with his brothers and all who had gone up with him to bury his father (Gen 49:29–32; 50:12–14).

At this point I imagine that both fundamentalist and *critical* scholars would jump through the roof that I turn on its head a wonderful story that teaches how even misfortunes are stepping stones that God uses to help his favorites to reach the top. After all, is this not the way these stories have always been read and interpreted both in devotional literature and scholarly commentaries? What can be more inspiring than to know that you are God’s favorite, that God gives you some dreams that one day yours brothers and even your parents would fall at your feet, that you are pushed to the bottom of the world, but from there God sends some famine that threatens the world

with starvation, then you are given by God the key of how that famine can be undone, you save the world and then you are worshipped as a savior not just by foreigners, but by your family as well just as God had *promised* you in those dreams? Who would not want such a God and who would not love to read such a story and be inspired by it? The problem is, when did God tell Joseph that he was his favorite and when did God promise Joseph anything and that he was special to God? That he was special to Jacob, that is something we know for a fact and we know for a fact the reason Joseph was special to Jacob. Being the firstborn son of his favorite wife who fought with her sister because they ended up married to the same husband and then they decided to use their children to carry on their fight, Jacob decided to pick Joseph and promote him as boss over his brothers to show his devotion to his favorite wife. That Jacob had no other reason to favor Joseph can be seen from the fact that when Joseph disappeared and Jacob thought that he was dead, he quickly transferred all those favors to the second son of his favorite wife, although he was the last and the youngest, and according to the rule of blessing the oldest, he was the least qualified to be picked as favorite. But if Jacob had a reason to consider Joseph special, what reason could God have to do the same? And here I imagine that both fundamentalist and *critical* scholars would reply that God had promised Abraham that his descendants would be special so that God would make sure that they would always be blessed and be on top of all the others, and was not Joseph a descendant of Abraham? But even if that is what God promised Abraham, were not all the other eleven brothers equally descendants of Abraham, why did the same God promised only Joseph to be on top of the world while to the other eleven descendants of Abraham he promised that they should only crawl at the feet of their brother in order to receive food not for free, but to pay for it. If God promised Abraham many descendants who would all be blessed, how come that God always gave Abraham only *one* good descendant while all the others were not only evil, but the evil ones always had many descendants and multiplied while Abraham never managed to multiply that only one good descendant that he had? And when God promised to Abraham that the whole world would be blessed through his descendants he actually meant that one descendant would be boss at the feet of whom the whole world would crawl in order to receive food, how would the whole world be *blessed* through such a descendant? Can anyone imagine a more demonic world? What kind of world would that be if it were ruled by someone who is as ruthless and coldblooded as Joseph? What is so *wonderful* about this story? And I imagine that both fundamentalist and *critical* scholars may admit that there are some dirty quirks and foibles in these stories because God has to work with fallible humans, but the wonderful message is that in spite of those human faults God is able to guarantee a truly great happy ending of the story, and that what we need to look for and retain from these stories.

And that is precisely what I do; I look at the end of the story. Because the end of the story is not Jacob's taking residence in the luxury cave, but what happened to those brothers and their descendants back in that garden of Eden called Egypt not after very long time. And this is what we read:

Then Joseph died, and all his brothers, and that whole generation. But the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them. Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh (Exod 1:6–11).

As one can notice, we are no longer in Genesis, but the next book, Exodus. This new Pharaoh may not have known Joseph, but no doubt knew very well what Joseph did, and how he plundered the whole country and turned the whole population into slaves. Although the Egyptians may have looked upon Joseph as their savior while Joseph was alive, but they were not such idiots as not to understand that what Joseph did for them was to deprive them of everything they had and turn them into slaves, and when the whole population live with that understanding, it does not take long before a *liberator* emerges and turns upside down the pyramid of the power structure. Now the former masters are turned into slaves and the former slaves become the new masters. Does it sound familiar? While both fundamentalist and *critical* scholars enjoy the end of the story, I do not see the end of the story because this story has gone in circles since the first humans were created. As we remember, the story started with Abraham who left the garden of Eden in Ur of Chaldea because he found the life there oppressive in order to live a different kind of life in Canaan where God directed him, only for his descendants to end up as slaves in another garden of Eden or garden of the Lord which was Egypt. Now God is back to square one and needs another Abraham to take his descendants from this new garden of Eden back to Canaan because they ended up in the wrong place. And both fundamentalist and *critical* scholars find these stories fascinating precisely because they think that it was all orchestrated by God and God managed to orchestrate everything because all the characters in the stories had faith in God and they did what God expected them to do even when did very questionable things. God inspired Abraham to leave Ur in order to live in Canaan but then inspired Joseph's brothers to sell him as a slave in Egypt because God had a master plan to send a famine over the whole world in order to turn Joseph from a slave into a savior of the world because God wanted all the descendants to end up slaves in Egypt so that he has another opportunity to prove his power by bringing them out of their new garden of Eden into the same Canaan where they could have stayed all along had God not come

up with this wonderful story about Joseph through which he wanted to teach humans how powerful he was because he has no better way to have fun with his power but to play with humans by choosing them as his favorites and then *bless* them with promised lands where he takes them only to bring them somewhere else where they become even more *blessed* by being turned into slaves to be again *blessed* by being brought back where they started only to be taken back to Chaldea and turned into slaves again in Nineveh and Babylon. When you are such a powerful God and you are quite bored because you do not have videogames to play in heaven, what better ways to spend your endless time than to *choose* some humans as your favorites and *bless* them by promising them to be on top of the world only to turn them into slaves and then liberating them only to turn them into slaves again, just to have fun. And you can play this game as a God because humans are too stupid to understand what you are doing. And that brings us to a key question that is going to guide us in reading the rest of the Bible: Did the author of Genesis intend to present through these stories that the God who created humans in his own image was such a master demon, or are those who read these stories in such a way that God ends up a master daemon have demonic minds if they are not idiots? According to how both fundamentalist and *critical* scholars read the Bible, to be *chosen* and to be *blessed* by God, is the best excuse to be evil, if not downright demonic.

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