Clothing and Reconciliation in the Joseph Narrative (Gen 37-50)¹

This study of reconciliation in the Joseph story arose from reading several parallel studies on clothing and reconciliation.² It was prompted by the singular observation, how, after the moment of denouement in the story, Joseph gives back to his brothers a gift of clothing which they had many years earlier stripped from him (Gen 45:22). Out of their animosity, the brothers had stripped Joseph of his special long sleeved robe given to him by their father Jacob. But after revealing himself to all his brothers, Joseph gives to each brother a set of clothing and to his full brother Benjamin he gives five sets of clothing. They stripped him of his clothing in order to shun him far away from his family. But Joseph gives them clothing and sends them off to Jacob in order to bring the entire family together to Egypt for survival from famine. The stripping of clothing, deceit by clothing and the gift of clothing are woven through the entire fabric of the JN.


On the one hand, Fischer highlights the motif of reconciliation in the story by focusing on Joseph’s “hidden tears” which he sheds alone as the brothers recall how they had abandoned him in the pit and sold him to the Ishmaelites. On the other hand, Green draws attention to the motif of “clothing” that is woven through the JN.³ Since clothing

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¹  This paper was delivered at a simultaneous session at the CBAA meeting in 2004 held in Halifax, Canada. I would like to express my gratitude to those who offered their very helpful comments and suggestions.


³  In an earlier study, Aldina Da Silva also remains silent on the significance of the gift of clothing on the part of Joseph to his brothers where otherwise the symbolic function of the motif of the gift of clothing is
plays such a dominant role in the rise and fall of Joseph’s own fortune, I suspect the gift of clothing is more significant for reconciliation among brothers and sons and father alike than one might think on first sight. In fact, Joseph’s gift of clothing to each half brother and five sets of clothing to Benjamin is a touching attempt for him to be reconciled with his brothers. Joseph gives back to his brothers that which they had stripped from him. The quality of this dramatic gesture draws attention to the process of reconciliation which is at the heart of the narrative. Joseph’s gift of clothing, as a sign of reconciliation among brothers, reveals a concerted attempt on the part of the author to portray the importance of an on-going process of reconciliation in relationships.

Issues related to this process of reconciliation are election, acceptance of gifts, learning through one’s failures. How do you choose one person without ignoring others? How do you favor one and at the same time confirm others? Those who are not chosen for a specific task also are to be blessed. These are major themes for the writers of Genesis as we note their presence in stories with pairs of brothers: Abel and Cain, Ishmael and Isaac, Jacob and Esau.

Since Joseph manifests such a resolute decision to communicate reconciliation with his brothers through clothing, we can even ask whether the same does not take place between Joseph and his father Jacob. In fact when Israel dies, Joseph has him embalmed in the manner of the Egyptians, and Joseph himself will be embalmed after his own death. These are the only references to embalming in the entire Old Testament. Joseph is clothed by a special garment at the outset of the story by his father Jacob, and at the end this same character is clothed through embalmment by his brothers whom he makes promise that they return his bones to Canaan.

By noting the author’s play on clothing throughout the narrative, I would like to underscore the narrative’s complex presentation of reconciliation. The author is under no illusions as to the difficulty for reconciliation among these brothers, the sons of Jacob and even between Jacob and sons. It is tempting to see in this narrative a project of the author to reinforce a strategy for reconciliation in turbulent and divisive times. Reconciliation is not easy. It is not achieved through a single gesture. According to this narrative, reconciliation engages all parties who need to go out to the other and create situations where reconciliation indeed becomes a tangible possibility.

References to clothing in the Joseph Narrative

The function of clothing is particularly significant in the JN given the sheer number of references to clothing. But we should remember that clothing is noteworthy in the entire book of Genesis as well. Adam and Eve sew together fig leaves and make loincloths to hide their nakedness, Gen 3:7. The LORD makes garments of skins for Adam and Eve before they are banished from the garden, Gen 3:21. Noah’s sons, Shem and Japheth, take a garment to cover the nakedness of their father, Gen 9:23. Abraham’s servant gives clothing to Rebekah, Gen 24:53. Rebekah in turn takes the best clothing of Esau to give to her preferred son, Jacob, in order to deceive Isaac, Gen 27:15. And finally even within the JN, in the story of Judah (Gen 38), Tamar uses clothing to deceive Judah.

well elaborated, Aldina Da Silva, La symbolique des rêves et des vêtements dans l’histoire de Joseph et de ses frères.
into recognizing her familial rights. She removes her widow garments and covers herself with a veil.  

All these references to clothing in Genesis make it abundantly clear that the opening gift of clothing that Jacob makes to Joseph will be significant for the unraveling of the story. The first reference to a piece of clothing is precisely the long sleeved robe which shows Joseph’s special place in the heart of his father Jacob. And a corresponding reference to clothing is made through Joseph’s generous gift of a set of clothing to each half brother and five sets of clothing to his full brother Benjamin. Moreover, when his father dies, Joseph has him clothed as he orders the servants to embalm his father. Joseph clothes his brothers and even his father as a sign of his intimate trust and respect. Joseph himself is embalmed, by his brothers as he has them promise to return his bones to Canaan.

Terms referring to various forms of clothing in Gen 37-50

- **חַפֵּזוֹת (Chafzot)** long sleeved robe or just robe
- **יָרָה בְּגֵרָתוֹ (Yarah Be'gero)** (he tears his garments)
- **יָרָה בְּגֵרָתוֹ שֵׁיָרָתוֹ וְשֻׁמְנֵיהֶנָּה (Yarah Be'gero She'iro) (Jacob tore his clothes… put on sackcloth)
- **תִּפְדַּה נְפֵרָה אֱלֹמְנָה וְשֻׁמְנֵיהֶנָּה (Tif'dah Nep'ra El'omna) (Tamar’s veil and widow’s garment)
- **לַחֲמֵם אַהֲבָבי וֹרֵתָם (Lachhem Ahavbei Voretam) (... to embalm his father and they embalmed Israel)

The sets of problematic relationships

At the outset of the story, in some four verses, the context surrounding Jacob’s sons in Canaan is set. Joseph is seventeen years old, he brings bad reports of his brothers to his father, he is the preferred son of Jacob, the son of his predilection, he receives a long-sleeved robe from his father as a sign of favour, and his brothers hate him because Jacob loves him more than them. The gift of the long-sleeve robe becomes a symbol of his precarious status in the family as we shall see when his brothers finally have an opportunity to take action against him.

The manner in which Joseph speaks of his dreams does not help him in his relations with father and brothers. How does he understand his special place in his father’s affection and the significance of his role in the world foreshadowed in his dreams? His dreams appear as a pair and they begin the pattern of doubling which we encounter throughout the narrative. In his first dream, as the sons are binding sheaves in a field, Joseph’s sheaf stands upright and the brothers’ sheaves bow down to his. The brothers hate him even more for recounting this dream to them. The second dream is also

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4 Two recent studies convincingly highlight the relationship of the Judah episode (Gen 38) to the rest of the JN through parallels and nuances. Richard Clifford, “Genesis 38: Its Contribution to the Jacob Story,” and André Wénin, “L’aventure de Juda en Genèse 38 et l’histoire de Joseph.”

5 The only other reference to **חַפֵּזוֹת (Chafzot)** in the OT refers to a long-sleeved robe worn by the virgins of the King. “Now she was wearing a long robe with sleeves; for this is how the virgin daughters of the king were clothed in earlier times,” 2 Sam 13:18,19.
told to the brothers though it is about his entire family. The sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to Joseph. He is rebuked also by his father in this matter with the question, “Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow to the ground before you?” His brothers are jealous while Jacob ponders these matters as parents are wont to do.

In a very short span of time, the author creates a scene that reveals two problematic sets of relationships. The most obvious and dramatic problem arises in Joseph’s relationship to his brothers. They hate him because he is specially favoured by his father, because he brings bad reports to his father about them, and because he announces to them all his dreams where he revels as a teenager is apt to do in an elevated and central position.

But a second problematic relationship should not be overlooked, namely the relationship between Jacob and Joseph. Jacob’s excessive predilection for Joseph which is made manifest in the gift of the long-sleeved robe causes a serious rift among brothers and in the family. While the second dream foreshadows the entire family coming down to Egypt to be with Joseph, the strained relationship between Joseph and his parents, namely his father, will clamour for attention as well. One might interpret the special favour Jacob has for Joseph as simply paralleling the special role that God envisages for Joseph. This is unfortunate since the author is suggesting a blindness in Jacob that will require examination and transformation on his part. In commenting on the verses where Jacob sends Joseph off to report on the welfare of his brothers (Gen 37:13-14), Brueggemann notes how blind Jacob is to the animosity that they harbour toward him. Has Jacob so soon forgotten what indiscriminate favouritism can do among brothers, since he himself endured a struggling relationship with his own brother Esau who was favoured by their father Isaac? The trials that Jacob faces, to send his sons to Egypt in search of food, his reluctance to send his beloved Benjamin off to Egypt, his own fear to go down to Egypt, all point to the fact that Jacob also undergoes a series of challenges which inform his own transformation. In fact, in the path to reconciliation, perhaps since he has been in part responsible for so much animosity, it is his own last words from beyond the grave which convey the final plea for reconciliation, “I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you” (Gen 50:16).

Character flaws in Jacob, Joseph and the brothers cause rifts in their relationships. From the opening brief scene, the narrative has raised expectations as to the resolution of character faults in all the main characters. Jacob’s love for a favoured son is excessive and will need to be restrained or transformed. Joseph’s naïve arrogance of being the favoured one will be immediately challenged. Why is one among many favoured, and what tasks are brought to bear in being a favoured one? The brothers’ animosity toward Joseph leads to the most apparent act of violence and betrayal in the story. Understandably it receives the most attention in the path toward reconciliation.

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7 Beauchamp avoids over emphasizing the possible devious intention behind the brothers’ plea by stating that for the author it was only right for the ultimate call to reconciliation among brothers to be taken through the figure of the father who had caused the rift in the beginning. The father, as a transcendent figure in the other life, is effecting or pointing to reconciliation. See, P. Beauchamp, “Joseph et ses frères : offense, pardon, réconciliation,” pp. 11-12.
The jealousy of the brothers toward Joseph borders on the extreme (four times the author underscores the hatred and jealousy they bear toward Joseph, Gen 37:4,5,8,11) and it is this strained relationship that becomes the motor in the ensuing narrative. How should they behave toward a favoured one in their midst? This problematic set of relations will clamour for attention and resolution. Each character, Jacob, Joseph, and the set of brothers, will undergo a transformation in relation to the others. And it is interesting to follow the development of these transformations through the lens of the author’s treatment of clothing in the narrative.

The relationship between Joseph and his brothers

The opening violent crisis focuses precisely on the relationship between Joseph and his brothers. Their animosity leads them to act out of their hatred when opportunity strikes and they are alone with Joseph who is far away from the protecting hand of his father. Significantly, the first thing they do is strip him of his long-sleeved robe and then they throw him into a pit. We are not privy to any of the teenager’s reactions at this point. The narrative concentrates on the calculating rumination of the brothers. But there are signs of hope expressed through two leading brothers, Reuben, the eldest, and Judah, both of whom want to spare their brother of death. Reuben tears his clothes at the thought that perhaps Joseph is dead. When they finally resolve to sell him and he is dispatched, they take the long-sleeved robe, dip it in goat’s blood, and have it brought to their father. The symbolism of clothing here is quite striking. The sign of Joseph’s excessive favour on the part of the father has been radically turned into its opposite, a sign of disproportionate and deceiving violence. As we shall see, clothing will continue to be both problematic and significant for Joseph in the ensuing narrative.

The transformation of Joseph

The account of Joseph in Potiphar’s house transfers the narrative from the family life of Jacob to that of the royal court. “The Lord was with Joseph” (Gen 39:2). Again we have not been privy to the inner transformation of Joseph that shows him move from the haughty teenager of the prologue to a young discerning man of integrity and self-composure. But here too, clothing will get Joseph into trouble. He rejects the overtures of Potiphar’s wife to have an affair and clings to his integrity because of the favour Potiphar has shown him. As Joseph flees the courtyard, she grabs his clothing and presents it to Potiphar as testimony against him. The scene is clearly reminiscent of the brothers presenting Joseph’s robe stained in blood to deceive their father. But the radical difference here is that Joseph is condemned to a second “pit” not out of any wrong-doing or limitation on his own part, but as the direct result of his personal integrity. Indeed Joseph is tested twice. First he is rejected by his brothers and thrown into a pit, and now he is tested a second time, not of his own doing, and is thrown into prison. He emerges from both tests as a man of integrity who knows and recognizes his limits, and as one

Andre Wénin offers a fascinating reading of this violent and deceiving act on the part of the brothers. He notes first of all the superfluous nature of this act. The brothers did not need to point to Joseph’s disappearance at all. Does the presentation of Joseph’s bloodied robe to their father reveal their desire to hurt the father in particular for his excessive love for this son? Does it not then also point to their own desire and hope for reconciliation? See A. Wénin, “La tunique ensanglantée de Joseph (Gn xxxvii 31-33): un espoir de réconciliation?” VT 54 (2004): 407-410.
who uses his abilities and powers for the benefit of others. Joseph emerges here as a person who has learned to use his gifts for the service of others. God is the one who has been preparing him for a unique role to be of service to the entire clan.  

The author has chosen not to dwell on the inner struggles Joseph has undergone in the tests. As readers, we listen in on the brothers’ internal ruminations as they are tested with respect to their siblings. As readers, we are able to listen in on Jacob’s ruminations in letting go of his favoured son. But we are not privy to the reasoning of Joseph in his moments of trial. Perhaps this is the author’s subtle reminder to the reader that we do not achieve positions of integrity through our own efforts alone, but ultimately receive them as gifts.

The pattern of God accompanying Joseph to give him favour and success with Potiphar is affirmed in prison as well. He uses the favour shown to him in the gift of interpreting dreams to reveal to others what is in store for them. The pattern of a pair of dreams parallels Joseph’s own pair of dreams in the prologue. The butler receives a favourable message. The baker does not. When Pharaoh asks that Joseph be brought before him to help in the interpretation of his double dreams, Joseph shaves and changes his clothing. The change of clothing opens up the possibility that his own situation may soon dramatically change.

With his careful interpretation of Pharaoh’s dreams and astute advice for Pharaoh to procure a manager for the ensuing years of plenty, Joseph rises to the highest peak of public favour in the narrative. He has traversed through several peaks and failures to this elevated position of Pharaoh’s right hand. He has traversed a stormy path from his

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9 There have been several recent attempts to cut down the level of virtue in Joseph’s character perhaps as a critique against G. von Rad’s elevated reading of Joseph as a wisdom figure.

See M. V. Fox, “Wisdom in the Joseph Story,” VT 21 (2001) 26-41. But just because Joseph is not necessarily presented as a sage, that does not mean that the author is not employing sapiential values throughout the narrative.

Similarly Clifford downplays Joseph’s own level of conversion by suggesting that Judah’s conversion takes place before that of Joseph. Richard Clifford, “Genesis 38: Its Contribution to the Jacob Story,” pp. 531-532. I see no need to downplay the transformation that has taken place in the character of Joseph, which the author appears bent on emphasizing, to compensate for the lack of attention drawn to Judah’s transformation.

Aaron Wildawsky reads the entire Joseph Story as a negative antithesis to that of Moses the lawgiver (Assimilation Versus Separation: Joseph the Administrator and the Politics of Religion in Biblical Israel. New Brunswick, U.S.A.: Transaction Publishers, 1993). For Wildawsky Joseph represents both extreme assimilation and the absolute desire for survival even by means of injustice. His story in Genesis should be read as an example of an Israelite anti-hero. Joseph clings to power and this power which employs the manipulation of nature for survival ultimately leads to the slavery not only of the Egyptians but also of the Hebrews. While I agree that the passage regarding the enslavement of the Egyptians during the years of famine (Gen 47:13-26), which anticipates the Hebrews’ own ensuing enslavement, is a critique of centralized government, this is not a judgment that can extend to the entire Joseph Narrative. This critique of centralized government is a critique of the Monarchy which is anticipated by Samuel (1Sam 8:1-22). For this extreme negative judgement, Wildawsky chooses to ignore or distort the narrator’s judgment that the LORD was with Joseph to guide him in his actions (Gen 39:2,3,5,21,23) and Joseph’s own declaration of God’s place in his life and in the lives of others (Gen 39:9; 40:8; 41:16,25,28,32,51,52; 42:18; 43:23; 45:5,7,8,9; 48:9; 50:19,20).

10 P. Beauchamp emphasizes this reading throughout the narrative. Neither conversion, nor reconciliation takes place simply in a single act, but rather the narrative presumes a process of conversion which faces anger, resentment and reconciliation. He names this complex process “the economy of forgiveness”. See P. Beauchamp, “Joseph et ses frères : offense, pardon, réconciliation,” pp. 7-8.
father’s favour in his home to the pit of his brothers’ anger, to favour in Potiphar’s household, to the pit of Pharaoh’s prison, and now to the highest place in the court of Pharaoh save the person of Pharaoh himself. This has been a rather long journey for Joseph and in a certain manner a major part of the story comes to a conclusion. Joseph the favoured one by his father falls out of favour twice only to be elevated to the highest position in the court of Pharaoh. But the story is not simply about Joseph. Essentially it is a story of relationships. And those relationships need to be healed.

Joseph’s elevated status in Egypt is also confirmed with a gift of clothing. Along with the signet ring on his finger and a gold chain around his neck, Joseph receives from Pharaoh garments of fine linen. What remains to unfold in the narrative is for the brothers and Jacob himself to undergo trials that will bring about the reconciliation among brothers and that of father and son. The unresolved relationships between himself and his brothers on the one hand and between himself and his father on the other clamour for attention. Joseph’s dreams foreshadowed a renewed relationship at the very outset of the story. Since the narrative expounded on Joseph’s own journey through two tests, that of the pit and the dungeon, we may well suspect the trial of Jacob and the brothers to unfold in a series of two.

The transformation of Jacob/Israel

Jacob’s first trial hits at the very heart of what he clings to. His sons deceive him into thinking that his favoured son is dead, torn apart by a wild animal. He tore his clothes in mourning. But the first test does not lead to integrity. Jacob now clings to his second beloved son of Rachel, Benjamin. He had sent his sons to Egypt in search of food, but he retains Benjamin, lest some tragedy befall him. He has already lost one favoured son by sending him off to check on the others. He was not about to place into jeopardy this second favoured son.

In the second test, Jacob is asked to let go of his remaining beloved son, Benjamin. Notice that it is Joseph’s request for the presence of Benjamin that forces Jacob to release his favoured son. At first, Jacob adamantly refuses. There is a part of Jacob’s relationship to his sons that is disturbing. He is unwilling to place Benjamin in danger in order to save his son Simeon. But finally the enduring crisis of the famine enlists the promise of protection on the part of Judah. Jacob agrees to send Benjamin down to Egypt for the sake of Simeon and to receive food. “As for me, if I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved” (Gen 43:14). In this act of self denial on Jacob’s part, we encounter the themes of freedom and extraordinary abundance. In letting Benjamin go into danger in order to save Simeon, Jacob in return receives all of his sons back. We may note the reversal of the prologue’s structure of sending. There, Jacob had sent his beloved son Joseph into an unknown danger to bring back a report on his brothers. Here

11 The episode of Judah in Gen 38, where we see his integrity challenged in his concern for his youngest son by Tamar, foreshadows the need for conversion in all characters. Clifford argues this point quite effectively; see “Genesis 38: Its Contribution to the Jacob Story.”

12 Judah emerges as the key person in the narrative who facilitates the transformation of Jacob and reconciliation between Joseph and the brothers. Clifford takes great pains to point out how the conversion of Judah in Gen 38:26, where he exclaims, “She is more righteous than I” not only precedes that of Joseph, but actually prepares for Joseph’s declarations of faith, Gen 50:19-20. See Clifford, “Genesis 38: Its Contribution to the Jacob Story,” pp. 531-532.
Jacob freely sends his beloved son Benjamin into a known danger with his nine other sons to free Simeon and to gain food for survival. But in giving Benjamin up, Jacob receives back far more than he could ever have imagined. He gains his son Joseph. For Jacob this is an unexpected gift for releasing his favoured son Benjamin from his protection.

The transformation of the brothers

The more dramatic trial lies in store for the brothers. Just as the opening set of relationships focused on the drama of the brothers’ hatred for Joseph, so too does the parallel drama of reconciliation focus on the tests and transformation of the brothers. Joseph reconstructs for his brothers a double trial in order to bring about a meaningful reunion of the entire family in Egypt.

Interpreters of the narrative often express inexplicable wonder as to why Joseph treats his brothers so harshly. Does he really harbour ill feeling toward them for what they had done to him? Is he testing them so harshly outwardly because he loves them inwardly? These are the two extreme interpretations of Joseph’s seeming harshness. In the first test, the emphasis is clearly on Joseph’s harsh words for he accuses them of being spies. Joseph alone recognizes his brothers. They do not recognize him. “And this allows Joseph to interrogate them and test them, to see whether they are as heartless now as they were twenty years earlier.”

But when Joseph overhears the remorse they express among one another as they recall the sufferings of Joseph, he weeps and has their money returned to them secretly. Beachamp notes how he had earlier accepted the loving reason for the harsh treatment of Joseph through the lens of Dostoevsky in The Brothers Karamazov, where Staretz Zosima declares that Joseph persecutes his brothers because he loves them. While acknowledging this positive reality in Joseph’s harsh treatment of his brothers, Beauchamp recognizes the turbulent laws of “the economy of forgiveness”. The harshness of Joseph’s words and the precariousness of their own response to his threats stem from the broken relationship among brothers. The path of reconciliation has its own economics. It is a complex and difficult process. It is not achieved with a single gesture or a simple word. Joseph in his love for his brothers is bound by the laws of this economy of forgiveness. Beauchamp believes that the expressed harshness of Joseph belongs to the laws of rejection and reconciliation. Joseph is not free simply to forgive his brothers. That power does not rest with him. Forgiveness would not necessarily achieve reconciliation. Joseph must create the conditions for his brothers and perhaps even for himself to reach a point where they can become reconciled to one another. At this point in the narrative, Joseph does not know if his brothers have learned to respect one another. He creates a test in order to see how they will behave. In turn, they themselves will discover how they will treat one another in a moment of danger. Will they give themselves up in order to save the other. Or will they be content to abandon a sibling as they had earlier done to Joseph? This path of reconciliation is fraught with danger. The process will parallel the double testing Joseph himself had undergone in his twofold falling into a pit. (In a gentler form, I believe, Jesus creates the conditions for Peter to recognize honestly his

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own fear and betrayal while at the same time confirm him in his love for Jesus. Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him, paralleling the earlier triple denial of Peter. “Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to him, “Lord you know everything; you know that I love you” John 21:17).

The first test challenges the brothers to take a stand regarding one of their siblings, Simeon. They are to bring to Egypt this youngest brother, Benjamin, of whom they had spoken, to prove that in fact they are not spies. They pass this first test and they express remorse among themselves for what they had done to their younger brother many years ago. Joseph overhears their conversation and cannot contain his tears. He weeps even as he hides himself from them.

But the testing does not stop here, just as Joseph’s testing did not stop with the first crisis of the pit, nor does Jacob’s testing stop with mourning of the loss of Joseph. The testing does not even end when the brothers in fact verify their story and present Benjamin to the Viceroy of Egypt. They are given a royal meal with Benjamin receiving a portion five times greater than that of the others. Here Joseph clearly expresses his love for his brothers. He expresses a love for his full younger brother Benjamin even more. But reconciliation still has a path to follow. Joseph manufactures a second test to see how the brothers will act toward this youngest brother. This second test goes deeper into the relationship among brothers. Here Joseph is recreating the earlier situation where he as the favoured son was subjected to the power of the brothers. Benjamin, now in the place of his brother Joseph, will be subjected to a position of threat vis-à-vis his older brothers. How will they react to the danger of the younger brother who is favoured by his father? The silver cup that is planted in Benjamin’s sack is discovered by the guard to the absolute shock of the brothers, especially to Judah who had vouched for his safety to their father. Echoing their father’s response to the blood soaked long-sleeved robe that was Joseph’s, they also “tear their clothing” in remorse. When the brothers offer themselves to be slaves along with Benjamin, they are expressing a family solidarity far beyond that of the opening chapter. Joseph declares that in divine justice only Benjamin should remain a slave. In response, Judah recounts the entire history of their family regarding Joseph and Benjamin, and the pain that Jacob would feel in this loss of his youngest son. He offers no solution to the Viceroy but simply says, “How can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? I fear to see the suffering that would come upon my father.” At this point we have the denouement of the narrative. The suspense of Joseph finally revealing himself erupts. Copious tears follow. The extraordinary reconciliation among brothers is about to begin to take shape.

Since the rupture among brothers took place over a garment, it should not be surprising to see Joseph expressing a desire for reconciliation through a gift of garments. The bestowal of garments reveals a position of power. That position of power is clearly manifest in Joseph’s relation to his family. But the emphasis in the bestowal of gifts is not to assert power, but to convey respect and trust. He gives back to them that which they had stripped from him. Most immediately, Joseph’s gift of clothing touches upon the brothers’ gesture of tearing their own clothing in seeing Benjamin accused of stealing the silver cup. The same Hebrew word for clothing is used. But the gift of clothing cannot

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15 Victor Matthews provides a helpful background for understanding the anthropological significance of “giving clothing as a gift” see Matthews, “The Anthropology of Clothing in the Joseph Narrative”.
help but touch upon the robe that was stripped from his own body many years ago at the hands of these half brothers.

As he sends his brothers back to Canaan to bring their father and all that they have to him in Egypt, he gives to each of them a set of garments. But there is a surprise. He gives to Benjamin, a brother whom he also now favours, five sets of clothing. There is still a favoured one, but the others have not been ignored. In this gesture toward his brothers from his position of power, Joseph is correcting the limitation of his father in favouring one of his sons while neglecting the others. In addition to the five sets of clothing, Joseph gives Benjamin 300 pieces of silver. The pieces of silver pick up the allusion to the silver cup placed in Benjamin’s sack and perhaps even the twenty pieces of silver for which Joseph had been sold by the brothers. Benjamin alone receives the gift of silver.

The path to reconciliation does not end even with Joseph’s bestowal of clothing to each brother. This may be surprising, but not so if we realize that for the author reconciliation is by no means an easy task. When Jacob dies, the brothers again fear that Joseph may harbour revenge for what they had done to him. Through a reference to the words of Jacob their father, they ask for forgiveness. “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.” It seems as if this reconciliation is ultimately only possible through an appeal to the words of the father, since it was Jacob who created such turmoil in his family by expressing his special favouritism to Joseph. Joseph’s response is to weep yet once again and to assure them of his own servitude to God. There is a lot of weeping in the JN, more so than in any other biblical narrative. Notice that the weeping takes place at moments when reconciliation is anticipated or communicated. “Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do me harm, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today” (Gen 50:20).

As noted earlier, Jacob also had undergone tests with respect to the favoured son. Unwittingly he had sent his favoured son Joseph into a position of critical danger to see how his other sons were doing. This ended in disaster. Later he would send his sons off to danger in Egypt while keeping his newly favoured son Benjamin at his side. Jacob faces the second test when he realizes that for the sake of the entire family he must let go of the favoured son. Courageously, he gives Benjamin up to the power of his brothers and in so doing gains not only Benjamin and Simeon back but also the favoured son he thought had been torn apart by a wild animal.

Is there a gesture between Joseph and his father Jacob that might include clothing as a sign of reconciliation? It is interesting to recognize the double reference to embalming at the very end of the narrative. Joseph has his father embalmed in the manner of Egypt. “Joseph commanded the physicians in his service to embalm his father. So the physicians embalmed Israel” (Gen 50:2). This act of having his father clothed through embalmment in returning him to the earth certainly is to be read as a gesture of respect and reconciliation. Though it takes place after Jacob’s death, it is a sign of Joseph’s reconciliation toward the entire family and to Jacob, specifically, who is the source of life for the family.
Moreover, Joseph himself is embalmed. “And Joseph died, being one hundred and ten years old; they embalmed him and he was placed in a coffin in Egypt.” The embalming of Joseph, with its feature of wrapping the body in fine linens with spices is a final form of clothing that rounds off the story of Joseph and brings it to completion. At the beginning, Joseph had received a long sleeved robe that would launch him on a journey of turbulence and success far away from his family. Every key personage in Jacob’s family is clothed and unclothed. Clothing is stripped from Joseph twice and he changes his clothing to meet with Pharaoh. Jacob, Reuben and then all the brothers tear their clothing at the thought of death or possible demise of those they love. At the end, Joseph himself receives the clothing of embalmment in Egypt at the hands of his own brothers, the Israelites. At the beginning, the father’s gift of clothing of the long-sleeved robe had torn him away from his family. But in the end, the Israelites clothe Joseph in Egypt with the clothing of embalmment.

**Conclusion**

The JN highlights the long and arduous path to effective reconciliation. Both sides of a broken relationship are involved. Past wrongs must be remembered and relived for true reconciliation to occur. Only then can effective decisions take place that forge new relationships. Joseph creates situations whereby the brothers, Jacob and indeed Joseph himself are forced to relive the past harm they inflicted on others. These tests give the family an opportunity to restore their own relationship with Joseph and among one another. Joseph places Benjamin into apparent danger in order for the brothers to relive their decision to reject a favoured one in their midst. Joseph relives his own desire for revenge in the “harsh” words he has for the brothers. This time, instead of abandoning Benjamin, the brothers are willing to become slaves in order to protect the favoured one of their father who is in their care. Jacob must relive his own particular relationship to a favoured son. He must be willing to part with the one whom he loves in order to bring about the restoration of Simeon and the survival of the family. In both cases, the author crafts the path to transformation and to reconciliation through a double test perhaps to parallel the double test through which Joseph himself had passed in order for his rise to power in Egypt to occur. All of these events are given divine approbation. They take place within a divine plan to bring about good even from the meanderings and disasters of human decisions.

The monarchy has often been suggested as the social location for the JN. The beneficial effects of the Egyptian court to allow people to survive in famine, but also the negative effects of centralized government, whereby the subjects become like slaves, are both present in Joseph’s rise to power in Egypt. Both themes are also present in the historical works portraying the rise of the monarchy in Israel. The people’s demand to Samuel for a king to be like other nations brings a certain stability, but it also brings taxation and tremendous burdens. But the dominant theme in the JN of reconciliation could very well point to a later period in Israel of alienation and dispersion where Israel is not in the promised land. There is little in the text which allows us to determine the time and location of the narrative’s composition or adaptation. The very different presentation of God’s role in the world, namely to work through the forces of history and creation rather than through direct acts of power, displays several affinities with the sapiential
movements in later Israel. The narrative’s dominant theme of reconciliation, with its emphasis on an arduous and lengthy process, fits well with the task of reconciliation among Israelites after the return from the Babylonian Exile.

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