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**Fung, Yiu-Wing**

***Victim and Victimizer: Joseph's Interpretation of his Destiny***

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Several recent works have questioned established views on the book of Genesis. Many have applied narrative analysis to the Joseph story and different evaluations of Joseph's character have been suggested. Some view Joseph through his speeches in a positive light. Others say his actions indicate a questionable character. In this work, Fung scrutinizes Joseph's speeches, especially those about God's intentions and actions, and seeks "to expose the problematic nature of (Joseph's) ideology", which ought not, in Fung's view, be too readily equated with the view of the narrator. He states: "I will try to demonstrate that the more (Joseph) speaks of God, the more his speeches become incoherent. As a result, each of his claims of God's specific action, although if it stands alone it can be reasonably justified, becomes highly problematic in the context of the rest of the claims." (p. 12) The narrator's statement that God 'was with Joseph' does not clarify the situation. When it is said of earlier Genesis characters, it only indicates divine assistance and is not a judgment on their character. We cannot assume God sanctions Joseph's actions and words (pp. 13-15).

In ch. 1, Fung addresses the issue of Joseph's claim of divine providence (Gen 45.4-11 and 50.19-20). He adopts a deconstructive approach to reading following Derrida in part. The image of the 'pit' symbolizes the years of Joseph's enslavement. The term connects both his treatment at the hands of his brothers and his imprisonment in Egypt (40:15). But, Fung argues, that when Joseph later recognizes his brothers he enacts on them what he had condemned. He treats the Egyptians similarly (Genesis 41) (p. 37). The choice between death and slavery, which Joseph puts to his brothers, recreates the earlier choice in relation to Joseph, and highlights the alternative as false. Joseph's policy to enslave the Egyptians "in order to save them" calls the reader to re-examine his attitude. Joseph's claim that God sent him to Egypt to preserve life "is then a subtle repetition of the alternative of death or slavery." (p. 46) Fung concludes: "The choice of slavery to save lives is an act of sacrifice from the mouth of a real victim; it becomes an act of

aggression if it is spoken by a victimizer.” (p. 47) The divine good which Joseph speaks turns out to be of the same nature as the human evil in the story.

In the next chapter Fung examines Joseph’s claim that “the hierarchy of domination and subordination is necessary to secure survival” (p. 56), and outlines its strategy as well as its “incoherence and fallacy”. While Joseph’s claims about the pit (45:4-8a) and his dreams of lordship (45:8b-11) involve two opposing roles for him, they share a hierarchical structure and purpose. There are differences between the claims and dreams in terms of the nature of the necessity in each, and in terms of divine involvement. In the former, Judah uses the pit as a desperate compromise to save Joseph’s life. Later, when God causes the famine, Joseph promotes enslavement as a means to survival. His interpretation of the pit and his dreams becomes a sequence to achieve one end (p. 64). But Fung argues, “while the pit presupposes the dreams, the reverse is not true.” (p. 65) Joseph, in fact, hides “the justification of his dreams behind his suffering in the pit”. The enslavement of the Egyptians is not incidental but “derives from (Joseph’s) belief in divine domination.”(p. 70) Thus, in Joseph’s claim divine authority sustains hierarchical relationships. Fung states: “the story demonstrates that it is possible for one to abhor the pit while endorsing the ideology behind it.” (p. 85)

Fung examines the relationship of Joseph’s claim to the stance of the narrator in ch. 3. Many commentators equate the claims of Joseph with the view of the narrator. Fung assumes that a fair degree of incoherence in Joseph’s view would suggest the possibility that the narrator is in disagreement (p. 102). He examines two occasions in which characters appeal to God in the story, first, Judah in 44:16 (cf. also 42: 21-22, 28), and secondly, Joseph’s servant in 43:23. Fung suggests Judah could be appealing to God as a ploy to appease the Egyptian overlord who was a God-fearing man (42:18). In the second case, the servant “does not employ the name of God in a truthful way.” (p. 126) These examples should make readers cautious when characters appeal to God’s name. Fung concludes: “Judging from the discrepancies in his various claims, it is possible that the narrator juxtaposes Joseph’s justification of his dreams of domination with Judah’s rationalization of the pit of slavery in order to provide an ironic ending to his story.” (p. 127)

Fung surveys readers’ responses to Joseph’s claims in ch. 4. He looks at both biblical and literary studies and notes how some biblical scholars have ‘avoided’ challenging Joseph’s claims. In the literary studies section he acknowledges his reliance on Donald Seybold’s study “Paradox and symmetry in the Joseph Narrative” while offering criticism of it. Seybold sees aspects of the story, namely the sets of dreams, the family relationships, and variations on the “pit” episode, related to the “paradox of the pit”. Fung concludes in this chapter that “there is no simple resolution” to the questions at the heart of the Joseph story. “Instead of giving us a simple verdict, this story is better seen as giving us a chance to experience the problem of brotherhood and reconciliation.” (p. 169) The narrator reports that Joseph’s predictions in his dreams are fulfilled, but they do not provide confirmation that Joseph’s interpretation of the significance of these events is correct. Fung states: “Joseph’s story is a parable of knowledge – not of its certainty, but of its elusiveness. This story heightens as much as it clarifies the confusing

human condition and the inscrutable divine will behind it. Unfortunately, many readers (biblical scholars and literary critics) are taken in by Joseph's claims and unaware of their incoherence as I have outlined ..."

In the final chapter, Fung focuses on the two incidents that give rise to the brotherly conflict, namely Jacob's favouritism towards Joseph and Joseph's dreams of domination (37:3-11). The latter raises the question of divine favouritism (45:5-11 and 50:20-21). When Joseph forces the brothers to accept Benjamin as Jacob's favourite, he turns "the poison (favouritism) of the family unity into its remedy." (p. 196) While most scholars see the brothers' silence at Joseph's claim of divine favouritism as acceptance, Fung is cautious. It remains open in his view whether the brothers are convinced of Joseph's claim (p. 197).

Overall Fung sees Joseph "as a tormented soul permanently made wretched by his suffering in the pit" (p. 198). He is an example of how one victimized can easily become a victimizer. Joseph's interpretation of his experience is built on the "fundamental idea that the hierarchical structure of domination and subservience is necessary for survival." (p. 199) The alternative 'death or slavery' is developed in the story from a tactical or pragmatic principle within a family structure to a positive normative divine principle on a national level. The problem lies in Joseph's connection of his suffering in the pit and his domination envisaged in his dreams. Fung argues that the claims Joseph makes are not convincing. Joseph's final conviction (50:20) is "that what others have done to him is evil while the same measure, when he inflicts it on others, is good" (p. 205), but he is blind to the difficulty with his claim. He is ignorant of Judah's imposition in 37:26-27. Fung concludes: "This double blindness serves to call into doubt the certainty of the coalescence of the perspectives of the protagonist and the narrator in this story." (p. 206)

Fung's argument is generally convincing. Its strength lies in the detailed analysis of Joseph's claims and the grounds upon which they are built. The argument is well set out and progresses in a logical way. It can be both dense and subtle at points, and is dependent on a close reading of the story. Some repetition, e.g. on pp. 58-9, 72-3 and the several statements of the "aim" of the study, do not help the reader in their progress. Ch. 3, with its title "Is Joseph the narrator's mouthpiece" and its introduction, focuses the reader's attention on the question of the narrator's intention. But in the end, Fung rightly, in my view, draws back from conclusive statements about the narrator and only suggests the possibility of the narrator disagreeing with Joseph's claims. Fung has made a good case for at least questioning the coalescence of the narrator's view with Joseph's claims. On the other hand, there is no reason to assume, even given the detailed analysis, that the narrator believes the opposite of Joseph's claims.

A disappointment for this reader was that Fung did not at least venture into the area of the implications of his study for both doctrinal claims, which he alludes to on p. 205, and studies on Genesis as a whole. These questions invite some comment in a published work.

There are only a few minor typographical errors in the publication.