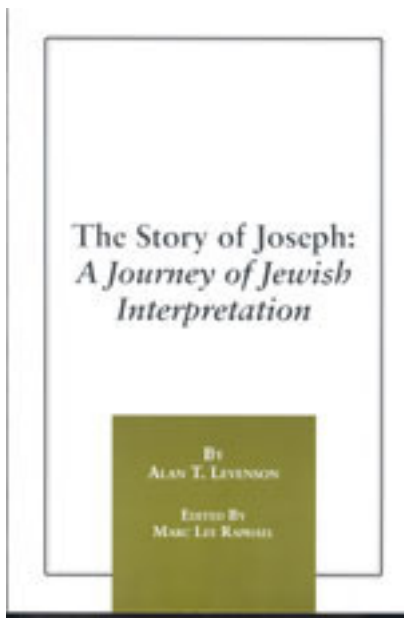


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Levenson, Alan T.

The Story of Joseph: A Journey of Jewish Interpretation

Edited by Marc Lee Raphael

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Pieter M. Venter
University of Pretoria
Pretoria, South Africa, 0002

In this publication Levenson invites his readers on a Jewish journey of interpretation. He observes a lack of orientation to a *Jewish* reading of the Bible. He therefore presents this guide for “Jews and Christians who want to learn how to read the Bible better” (ii). He wants to empower his readers to read the Bible more carefully and to engage in dialogue with the Bible. This method of reading the Bible in a specifically Jewish context has developed over the last two thousand years. To actively engage the text “Jewishly” (108) is to follow “the religious-ethical-spiritual sensitivity the rabbis brought to the Hebrew Bible” (106).

The publication consists of three parts. After the preface summarized above, part 1 continues with an introductory chapter in which the author defines the term “Jewish Bible,” indicates the role it played in Jewish life, and outlines the basic features of a Jewish reading. While Christian reading of the Bible tends to reduce the multidimensional nature of the Hebrew Bible, giving it a focus that it does not really possess, Jewish interpretation assumes that a single verse points in several directions, unleashing a wealth of meaning. In essence, the Jewish Bible is not only a translation of the Hebrew Tanak but Scripture with extensive commentary read in the synagogue. As indicated elsewhere by several other Jewish authors, “Bible” in Jewish thinking includes

several centuries of exegesis on the original texts. The Bibles read in synagogue include extensive commentary.

In this chapter Levenson provides a list of six characteristics of Jewish reading of the Bible. This list is repeated and summarized in the sixth and last chapter of the book. This reading entails an enthusiastic proliferation of comments (what the author calls “maximalism”), a willingness to entertain contradictory interpretations (“pluralism”), a midrashic insistence on scrutinizing every word for meaning (“hyperliteralism”), a desire to integrate the text (“holism”), and anachronistic identification (“familialism”) (cf. 109).

In the third chapter of part 1 (wrongly referred to as ch. 2 on page ii) Levenson identifies the narrative of Joseph in Gen 37–50 as material that is “accessible, readable, intriguing, and thought provoking” (14) and able to illustrate what a Jewish engagement with the text means. The Joseph narrative is a key link between Genesis and Exodus and influences later biblical books such as Esther and Daniel. By focusing on just this one story the author aims at emphasizing the continuity of Jewish interpretation from the Bible until present—an endeavor not found in other publications. The aim of the author with his exposition of the Joseph narrative is to enhance the skills of the reader to apply the methods learned in reading this narrative to other “biblical stories” (108; cf. iii) in the same way.

Part 2 (20–110) consists of a chapter-by-chapter reading of Gen 37–50. The author does not intend to provide an academic commentary on these chapters or a compendium of rabbinic commentary. Rather, he highlights some verses or sections in each chapter “that provoked especially revealing commentary over the ages” (ii). At the beginning of each of the fourteen biblical chapters a summary is presented of the contents of the specific chapter. This is followed by commentary following the text verse by verse identifying in typical Jewish style gaps and inconsistencies in the narrative. Working on the four levels of simple sense, implicit sense, suggested or hinted sense, and secret sense (see 71), a potpourri of Jewish commentary is offered on the questions provoked by the text. The commentary mostly comes from the classic rabbinic (70–500 C.E.) and the medieval (tenth–fourteenth centuries C.E.) eras, with an obvious preference for Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki (Rashi), but reference also to a wide variety of present-day Jewish writers, especially literary scholars such as Robert Alter, James Kugel, and Meir Sternberg. The author’s commentary gives the idea of a showcase for Jewish “intellectual gamesmanship” (198).

The headings used in this section illustrate the author’s intention to present themes that will interest the present-day audience: “Familial Favoritism and Fraternal Hate”; “Fault Lines: Jewish and Christian”; “Mrs. Potiphar’s Revenge”; “From Interpreter to Economic

Planner”; “Canaan Meets Egypt”; “The Power of Repentance”; “Between Rashi, Ramban, and Freud.” In this typical Jewish engagement with the text, the author uses a wide variety of Jewish exegetical methods used over many centuries, such as finding verbal and thematic ties, evaluating different meanings of Hebrew terms, identifying repeated and key words, referring to the probable background, using the *pardes* four-layered principle, debating the logic of the text, trying to fill up gaps in the text that are “so complete that even the midrashic imagination cannot fill it” (103), and indicating the “religious-ethical spiritual sensitivity that the rabbis brought to the Hebrew Bible” (106).

Part 3 comprises a welcome glossary of unfamiliar names and terms, a list of English sources consulted, and some biographical information on the author. Unfortunately, no index of names or authors is included in the publication.

As a Christian reader, I found the publication quite informative on how Jews read the Bible. The need for Old Testament scholars to consult Jewish study has been stressed over the last decades by many scholars, such as Brueggemann in his *Theology of the Old Testament*. Although Levenson is well acquainted with Christian scholarship, he seems to have been ill-informed on some topics. Remarks such as that the Bibles used in the Catholic tradition are based on different manuscripts than those on which the Tanak is based or that the Christian world reads the Old Testament without hesitation in translation while the Jewish civilization emphasized the reading of the text of the Bible in Hebrew (1) show some lack of knowledge of the history of translation in the Christian church. Interpreting the *sola scriptura* slogan of Protestantism as an unwillingness to consult previous biblical interpretation is simply untrue. The publication would have been much better off without uninformed remarks such as these.

Notwithstanding these, I found this a readable and interesting publication presenting a window on Jewish interpretation. It presents an enjoyable journey through several centuries of Jewish exegesis trying to understand the story of Joseph and its meaning for the faithful.