



The Sale of Joseph in Genesis 37:18–26: Narrative Cohesion and Coherence

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Résumé de l'article

The purpose of this discussion is to assess the ability of the Documentary Hypothesis to provide a compelling reading of Genesis 37. Is the literary reconstruction of the J/E source divisions able to offer a compelling, internally consistent text? As a counter proposal, I consider the framework of coherence theory as a means of evaluating the central claim of documentarians that Genesis 37 lacks compositional cohesion and coherence. The method of this discussion takes the following course. First, I sketch out a brief overview of the various compositional approaches to Genesis 37 and its place in the Joseph story. Second, I consider the nature of narrative cohesion and coherence and how these concepts inform one's reading of Genesis 37, arguing that the markers of cohesion embedded in the narrative provide a means of guiding the reader coherently through the twists and turns of the plot line. Third, I highlight several narrative links that cross proposed source boundaries, functioning as linguistic signals for cohesion, and that suggest literary coherence. Fourth, I re-assess the so-called Ishmaelite/Midianite problem that has served a central role in most source divisions of Genesis 37.

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הָעֵיזִר הַגְּדוֹלָה אֲשֶׁר
יֵשׁ-בָּהּ הַרְבֵּה מִשְׁתָּ



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THE SALE OF JOSEPH IN GENESIS 37:18–26: NARRATIVE COHESION AND COHERENCE

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One of the main questions scholars have raised regarding Genesis 37 focuses on the ability to read this text as a cohesive literary unit or not. One might argue that the ability to read the text coherently does not mean it necessarily is an internally consistent literary unit. However, one might also pose the question the other way around: Does the inability to read the text as a consistent literary unit necessarily mean that the so-called inconsistencies have arisen from source divisions? It may offer one possible conclusion, but it does not necessarily prove that the text in its current form is the product of combined sources. Apparent inconsistencies could result from several issues. For one, they could stem from the modern interpreter's distance from the historical circumstances behind the literary materials.¹

¹ Note the recent argument in favor of the text's unity in Richard C. Steiner, "Contradictions, Culture Gaps, and Narrative Gaps in the Joseph Story," *JBL* 139.3 (2020): 439–58. He argues that the perceived contradictions represent "an artifact of the cultural gap between modern readers and the ancient Israelites." He continues, "The evidence suggests that an ancient Israelite audience would have resolved these contradictions based on their knowledge of the cultural conventions of herding and human trafficking in their society—conventions that the narrative takes for granted but that are not always fully familiar to modern readers" (458). My treatment of this passage complements Steiner's "cultural/historical gap" proposal by focusing on narrative links between sources, as well as the inconsistencies internal to the J and E subdivisions. It also aligns with the recent observations of Gary Rendsburg, who believes "a macroscopic view of the narratives reveals their essential literary unity." He continues, "I do not wish to minimize the aforementioned issues [doublets and contradictions], nor sweep them under the rug, for they clearly are present in the biblical text—but to my mind the majority of them remain rather inconsequential matters. By contrast, the macroscopic approach, which treats the narratives as literary wholes, allows the reader to understand the biblical narrative in all its glory and with all of its interconnectivity" (Gary A. Rendsburg, *How the Bible*

They could also result from a difference in literary conventions for modern interpreters versus ancient composers.²

The purpose of this discussion is to assess the ability of the Documentary Hypothesis to provide a compelling reading of Genesis 37. What problems does this approach raise for the text as it has come down to us? Is the literary reconstruction of the J/E source divisions able to offer a compelling, internally consistent text? As a counter proposal, I will consider the framework of coherence theory as a means of evaluating the central claim of documentarians that Genesis 37 lacks compositional cohesion and coherence. The method of this discussion will take the following course. First, I will sketch out a brief overview of the various compositional approaches to Genesis 37 and its place in the Joseph story. Second, I will consider the nature of narrative cohesion and coherence and how these concepts inform one's reading of Genesis 37. Third, I will highlight several narrative links that cross proposed source boundaries, functioning as linguistic signals for cohesion and suggestive of literary coherence. Fourth, I will re-assess the so-called Ishmaelite/Midianite problem that has served a central role in most source divisions of Genesis 37.

LITERARY TREATMENTS OF GENESIS 37 AND THE JOSEPH STORY

The sale of Joseph in Genesis 37:18–26 has featured rather prominently in source-critical analyses of the Pentateuch, often serving as a test-case for the documentary approach. Jean Louis Ska notes its importance for Julius Wellhausen's defense of the Documentary Hypothesis. As Ska characterizes the situation, Wellhausen's theory "depended entirely on his capacity to demonstrate its soundness in the Joseph story."³ Perhaps this assertion is slightly overstated.⁴

is Written [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2019], 469–70).

² Edward Greenstein objects to scholars' resort to source analysis as a means of handling perceived inconsistencies in a text like Genesis 37. Instead, he urges the interpreter "to acquire a method for reading biblical narratives *as they are told*," and "to remain sensitive to the narrative's own style and try not to impose our cultural expectations upon the text." See Edward L. Greenstein, "An Equivocal Reading of the Sale of Joseph," in *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives*, ed. Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis, *The Bible in Literature Courses* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), 2:117. See also David A. Teeter and William A. Tooman, "Standards of (In)coherence in Ancient Jewish Literature," *HBAI* 9.2 (2020): 94–129; and Michael A. Lyons, "Standards of Cohesion and Coherence: Evidence from Early Readers," *HBAI* 9.2 (2020): 183–208.

³ Jean L. Ska, foreword to *The Composition of Genesis 37: Incoherence and Meaning in the Exposition of the Joseph Story*, by Matthew C. Genung, *FAT II* 95 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), viii.

⁴ Note the assessment of Herbert Donner, *Die literarische Gestalt der alttestamentlichen Josephsgeschichte*, SHAW.PH (Heidelberg: Winter, 1976), 19, who believes Genesis 37 receives too much attention in support of source

Nonetheless, Wellhausen does emphasize this text's importance for the theory: "As usual, it can be assumed that this work here is composed of J and E; our previous results urge this assumption and would be shaken if it were not provable."⁵ Documentarians have made various proposals for dividing the broader Joseph story into two independent sources, namely J and E.⁶ A central justification for these literary divisions are the two pairs of names attested throughout Genesis 37: Judah and the Ishmaelites on the one hand, Reuben and the Midianites on the other.⁷ Also prominent in the discussion are so-called narrative inconsistencies that are said to find resolution when the text is divided along the lines of the two pairs of names. Neo-Documentarians have sought to renew the source-critical enterprise, with Joel S. Baden naming this passage as the first of five texts demonstrating the merits of the Documentary Hypothesis.⁸

analysis.

⁵ "Es ist zu vermuten, dass dies Werk hier wie sonst aus J und E zusammengesetzt sei; unsere früheren Ergebnisse drängen auf diese Annahme und würden erschüttert werden, wäre sie nicht erweisbar" (Julius Wellhausen, *Die Composition des Hexateuchs und der historischen Bücher des Alten Testaments*, 4th ed. [Berlin: de Gruyter, 1963], 52).

⁶ E.g., Gerhard von Rad, "Josephsgeschichte und ältere Chokmah," in *Congress Volume: Copenhagen 1953*, eds. George W. Anderson et al., VTSup 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1953), 120–7; Anneli Aejmelaeus and Ludwig Schmidt, *The Traditional Prayer in the Psalms/Literarische Studien zur Josefsgeschichte*, BZAW 167 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1986); Lothar Ruppert, "Zur neueren Diskussion um die Josefsgeschichte in der Genesis," *BZ* 33.1 (1989): 92–97.

⁷ E.g., Heinrich Ewald, *Geschichte des Volkes Israel*, 3rd ed., (Göttingen: Dieterich'sche Buchhandlung, 1864), 1:588; August Dillmann, *Die Genesis*, 6th ed., KEH 11 (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1892), 404–6, 409–10; Heinrich Holzinger, *Genesis*, KHC 1 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1898), 223–4.

⁸ Along with Numbers 11, Numbers 16, Exodus 14, and Genesis 35. See Joel S. Baden, *The Composition of the Pentateuch: Renewing the Documentary Hypothesis*, AYBRL (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012). Fellow Neo-Documentarian Jeffrey Stackert identifies this publication as the "most systematic expression" of the renewed and reformulated Documentary Hypothesis. See Jeffrey Stackert, *A Prophet Like Moses: Prophecy, Law, and Israelite Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 19–20. Other representative voices of the Neo-Documentary Hypothesis include Menahem Haran, *The Biblical Collection: Its Consolidation to the End of the Second Temple Times and Changes of Form to the End of the Middle Ages*, 3 vols. (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1996–2008, Hebrew); idem, "The Bērīt 'Covenant': Its Nature and Ceremonial Background," in *Tebillah le-Moshe: Biblical and Judaic Studies in Honor of Moshe Greenberg*, eds. Mordechai Cogan, Barry L. Eichler, and Jeffrey H. Tigay (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 203–19; and Baruch J. Schwartz, "The Priestly Account of the Theophany and Lawgiving at Sinai," in *Texts, Temples, and Traditions: A Tribute to Menahem Haran*, eds. Michael V. Fox et al. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 103–34; idem, "Israel's Holiness: The Torah Traditions," in *Purity and Holiness: The Heritage of Leviticus*, eds. Marcel J. H. M. Poorthuis and Joshua Schwartz, JGPS 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 47–59; idem, "Reexamining the Fate of the 'Canaan-

Neo-Documentarians propose the following divisions for the sale of Joseph in Genesis 37:18–36.⁹

J-Story	E-Story
¹⁹ וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל-אָחִיו	¹⁸ וַיֵּרְאוּ אֹתוֹ מֵרָחֵק וּבְטָרֶם
הָנָה בָּעַל הַחֲלָמוֹת הַלְזָה	יִקְרַב אֲלֵיהֶם וַיִּתְנַבְּלוּ אֹתוֹ
בָּא:	לְהַמִּיתוֹ:
²⁰ וַיַּעֲתָהּ לָכֵן וְנִהְרָגָהּ	²¹ וַיִּשְׁמַע רְאוּבֵן וַיַּצִּלְהוּ
וַיִּנְשְׁלָכֶהּ בְּאֶתֶד הַבְּרוֹת	מִיָּדָם וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא נִבְנוּ נַפְשׁ:
וַאֲמָרְנוּ חַיָּה רָעָה אֲכָלְתָּהּ	²² וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵיהֶם רְאוּבֵן אֵל-
וְנִרְאָהּ מִהֲיָהּ חֲלָמָיו:	תִּשְׁפֹּכוּ דַם הַשְּׁלִיכוּ אֹתוֹ
²³ וַיְהִי כִּאֲשֶׁר-בָּא יוֹסֵף אֶל-	אֶל-הַבּוֹר הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר
אָחִיו וַיִּפְשְׁטוּ אֶת-יוֹסֵף	בַּמִּדְבָּר וַיֵּד אֶל-תִּשְׁלָחוּ-בּוֹ
אֶת-כֶּתֶנָּתוֹ אֶת-כֶּתֶנֶת	לְמַעַן הַצִּיל אֹתוֹ מִיָּדָם
הַפָּסִים אֲשֶׁר עָלָיו:	לְהַשִּׁיבוֹ אֶל-אָבִיו:
^{25b} וַיִּשְׂאוּ עֵינֵיהֶם וַיֵּרְאוּ	²⁴ וַיִּקְחֻהוּ וַיִּשְׁלְכוּ אֹתוֹ
וְהִנֵּה אֶרְחַת יִשְׁמַעֲאֵלִים	הַבְּרָה וְהַבּוֹר רֶק אֵין בּוֹ
בָּאָה מִגִּלְעָד וּגְמִלֵיהֶם	מִיָּם:
נִשְׂאִים נִכְאָת וּצְרִי וְלֹט	^{25a} וַיִּשְׁבּוּ לְאֶכְל-לֶחֶם
הוֹלְכִים לְהוֹרִיד מִצְרַיִם:	^{28a} וַיַּעֲבְרוּ אֲנָשִׁים מִדִּינִים
²⁶ וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוּדָה אֶל-אָחִיו	סָחָרִים וַיִּמְשְׁכוּ וַיַּעֲלוּ אֶת-
מִהַבְּצָע כִּי נִהְלַג אֶת-	יוֹסֵף מִן-הַבּוֹר

ites' in the Torah Traditions," in *Sefer Moshe: The Moshe Weinfeld Jubilee Volume*, eds. Chaim Cohen, Avi M. Hurwitz, and Shalom M. Paul (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 151–70. The term "Neo-Documentary Hypothesis" was first coined by David P. Wright, as noted in Jeffrey Stackert, "Distinguishing Innerbiblical Exegesis from Pentateuchal Redaction: Leviticus 26 as a Test Case," in *The Pentateuch: International Perspectives on Current Research*, eds. Thomas B. Dozeman, Konrad Schmid, and Baruch J. Schwartz, FAT 78 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 370 n. 3.

⁹ E.g., Baruch J. Schwartz, "How the Compiler of the Pentateuch Worked: the Composition of Genesis 37," in *The Book of Genesis: Composition, Reception, and Interpretation*, eds. Craig A. Evans, Joel N. Lohr, and David L. Petersen, VTSup 152 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 265–7; Baden, *Composition of the Pentateuch*, 37; Jeffrey Stackert, "Pentateuchal Coherence and the Science of Reading," in *The Formation of the Pentateuch: Bridging the Academic Cultures of Europe, Israel, and North America*, eds. Jan C. Gertz et al., FAT 111 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 260–1.

אָחִינוּ וְכַסִּינוּ אֶת־דָּמּוֹ: ²⁷לָכֵן וְנִמְכְּרֵנוּ לִישְׁמַעֲאֵלִים וַיְדַלְנוּ אֶל־תְּהִיבֹ כִּי־אָחִינוּ בְּשָׂרֵנוּ הוּא וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ אָחִיו: ^{28b}וַיִּמְכְּרוּ אֶת־יוֹסֵף לִישְׁמַעֲאֵלִים בַּעֲשָׂרִים כֶּסֶף וַיָּבִיאוּ אֶת־יוֹסֵף מִצְרָיִמָּה: ³¹וַיִּקְחוּ אֶת־כֶּתֶנֶת יוֹסֵף וַיִּשְׁחָטוּ שְׂעִיר עִזִּים וַיִּטְבְּלוּ אֶת־הַכֶּתֶנֶת בַּדָּם: ³²וַיִּשְׁלְחוּ אֶת־כֶּתֶנֶת הַפָּסִים וַיָּבִיאוּ אֶל־אֲבִיהֶם וַיֹּאמְרוּ זֹאת מִצְאָנוּ הַכֶּרֶ־ זֶה הַכֶּתֶנֶת בְּנֵךְ הוּא אִם־ לֹא: ³³וַיִּכִּירָה וַיֹּאמֶר כֶּתֶנֶת בְּנִי חַיָּה רָעָה אֲכַלְתֶּהוּ טָרֶף טָרֶף יוֹסֵף: ³⁴וַיִּקְרַע יַעֲקֹב שִׁמְלֹתָיו וַיִּשֶׁם שָׂק בְּמַחְתָּנוֹ וַיִּתְאַבֵּל עַל־בָּנָיו יָמִים רַבִּים: ³⁵וַיִּקְמוּ כָל־בָּנָיו וְכָל־בְּנֹתָיו לְנַחֲמוֹ וַיִּמְאֹן לְהַתְנַחֵם וַיֹּאמֶר כִּי־אֶרֶד אֶל־בְּנֵי אֲבִי שְׂאֵלָה וַיִּבֶךְ אֶתֹּ אֲבִיו:	²⁹וַיָּשֶׁב רְאוּבֵן אֶל־הַבּוֹר וְהִנֵּה אֵין־יוֹסֵף בַּבּוֹר וַיִּקְרַע אֶת־בְּגָדָיו: ³⁰וַיָּשֶׁב אֶל־אָחִיו וַיֹּאמֶר הַיֵּלֶד אֵינָנוּ וְאֲנִי אָנֹכִי אֲנִי־ בָּא: ³⁶וְהַמִּדְּנִים מָכְרוּ אֹתוֹ אֶל־ מִצְרַיִם לְפוֹטִיפַר סָרִיס פְּרֹעֹה שֶׁר הַטְּבָחִים:
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Introducing his analysis of Genesis 37, Baruch Schwartz argues that this chapter contains no fewer than six irreconcilable contradictions.¹⁰ One of these occurs in the first half of the chapter. Schwartz

¹⁰ Note that Steiner's analysis focuses on two: (1) Were Reuben and his

suggests that Jacob's family are initially portrayed as agrarian, which is subsequently contradicted by the fact that they are identified as shepherders.¹¹ Reference to the family's agrarian livelihood is inferred from Joseph's first dream.¹² This reading seems less likely, however, since the imagery of the brother's sheaves bowing before Joseph's sheave in the dream makes no claim about the family livelihood. Moreover, the explicit reference to the brothers' shepherding soon to follow is what identifies the family occupation for the reader. Another commonly cited inconsistency in this narrative is the sale of Joseph—in one setting he is sold to the Ishmaelites, while in another he is sold to the Midianites. Documentarians maintain that this problem is insurmountable. The only logical solution, it is argued, is to propose two independent narratives.

Other scholars have attempted to strike a balance between the Documentarian reconstruction of the text's literary origin and the striking literary features of the Joseph story that point to a unified story. Hermann Gunkel believed the Joseph story consisted of a series of independent stories, perhaps originally oral, that have since been woven together into the narratives of J and E, and which are largely no longer separable into identifiable units. He did believe, however, that the so-called doublets of Genesis 37 come close to offering such divisions, especially Joseph's sale to Midianites (identifiably E) versus his sale to Ishmaelites (identifiably J).¹³ Nonetheless, he identified the final product of the Joseph narrative as an artfully composed short story or novella.¹⁴ A similar tension between literary unity and source division is found in Gerhard von Rad's assessment of the Joseph story: "[I]t is from beginning to end an organically constructed narrative, no single segment of which can have existed independently as a separate element of tradition." Even still, von Rad qualified this organic construction to be the result of a redactor's skill in combining J and E.¹⁵ Regarding Genesis 37, he identifies the "double thread" of Judah versus Reuben and Ishmaelites versus

brothers present or absent when Joseph was initially sold? and (2) Was Joseph sold or stolen? (Steiner, "Contradictions," 442–58).

¹¹ Schwartz, "Compiler of the Pentateuch," 263 n. 2.

¹² Ibid., 269: "In J, on the other hand, the entire affair took place close to home, most likely in one of the fields in which Joseph and his brothers routinely gathered sheaves—as may be inferred from Joseph's dream."

¹³ Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, Göttinger Handkommentar zum Alten Testament: Abt. 1, Die historischen Bücher 1,1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1901), 356–9, 363–4, 368; idem, *The Legends of Genesis: The Biblical Saga & History*, trans. W. H. Carruth (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), 134.

¹⁴ See Hermann Gunkel, "Die Komposition der Joseph-Geschichten," *ZDMG* 76.1 (1922): 57–71, esp. 67.

¹⁵ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, rev. ed., OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 347–8. See also idem, "Josephsgeschichte," 120–7. Broadly conceived, von Rad's Joseph story consisted of Genesis 37, 39–47, and 50.

Midianites.¹⁶ Claus Westermann likewise took Genesis 37, 39–45, and parts of 46–50 as “a single seamless and complete unit by a single author” differing in style and content from the patriarchal narratives.¹⁷ As such, the Joseph story constitutes the conclusion of the Jacob narratives. Again, with scholars before him, he notes that the Reuben/Midianite and Judah/Ishmaelite materials represented “two narrative strands” that the author interweaved into the larger narrative.¹⁸

Supplementary approaches have proposed later redactional activity upon the earlier form of the story.¹⁹ The supplementary approach generally assumes the existence of an original core Pentateuchal narrative that was subsequently expanded by several supplementary layers, with each new layer adapting aspects of the underlying core with the addition of new material.²⁰ Early models proposed P as the original core, which was later supplemented by E, followed by J, and finally redacted with D, while other models propose a redactional order beginning with J: J supplement by E, JE supplemented by D, and finally JED supplemented by P.²¹

As it relates to the Joseph Story, Herbert Donner seeks to reconcile the inconsistency of von Rad, showing that the proposed duplicates in Genesis 37 (and 45) cannot be allocated to distinct sources

¹⁶ Rad, *Genesis*, 353.

¹⁷ Claus Westermann, *Genesis*, trans. David E. Green (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1987), 256; cf. idem, *Genesis 37–50*, trans. John J. Scullion, Continental Commentary (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 21–25.

¹⁸ Westermann, *Genesis*, 264–5. More specifically, Westermann identifies the materials related to the Ishmaelites in vv. 25b, 26, 27, 28b as variant insertions (Westermann, *Genesis 37–50*, 40).

¹⁹ We should also mention another theory regarding the Pentateuch’s composition called the fragmentary approach (or theory), as first proposed by Alexander Geddes (see *The Holy Bible, or the Books Accounted Sacred by Jews and Christians* [London: published by author, 1792], 1:xviii–xix). This theory proposes that the Pentateuch and Joshua were composed from numerous earlier fragmentary texts written by different authors at different times, which were compiled into their current literary form by a “collector” (according to Charles A. Briggs, *The Higher Criticism of the Hexateuch* [New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1897], 57–58). For a more recent example of the fragmentary approach, see Rolf Rendtorff, *The Problem of the Process of Transmission in the Pentateuch*, trans. John J. Scullion, JSOTSup 89 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1990).

²⁰ See Baden, *Composition of the Pentateuch*, 60–61. The first scholar to articulate the supplementary approach is thought to be Wilhelm M. L. de Wette (see *Kritik der Israelitischen Geschichte: Erster Theil. Kritik der mosaischen Geschichte*, vol. 2 of *Beiträge zur Einleitung in das Alte Testament* [Halle: Schimelpfennig, 1807], 29–30, as noted in Christoph Levin, “The Priestly Writing as a Source: A Recollection” in *Farewell to the Priestly Writing? The Current State of the Debate*, eds. Friedhelm Hartenstein and Konrad Schmid, AIL 38 [Atlanta: SBL Press, 2022], 4–5).

²¹ See Briggs, *Higher Criticism*, 61–68; Levin, “Priestly Writing,” 3–6, 9–11.

with any certainty.²² There is no way of proving they are not instead the result of the narrative technique of a single composer.²³ He maintains the legitimacy of source analysis for the rest of Genesis (i.e., J, E, and P), but interprets Genesis 37–50 as an independent narrative that was incorporated into Genesis and Exodus by a redactor. Donald B. Redford also rejected the documentary approach's proposed J and E sources for the Joseph story, arguing that Genesis 37 originally contained a Reuben/Midianite episode that was later supplemented by a "Judah expansion" involving Judah and the Ishmaelites.²⁴ Thomas Römer affirms the general unity of those parts from Genesis 37–50 that have been viewed as distinct from P as constituting an "independent Diaspora novella" from the Persian period.²⁵ When placed together, the P materials appear to recount the descent of Jacob and his family into Egypt—without any awareness of the Joseph story—and provide a narrative transition between the patriarchal and exodus narratives.²⁶ According to his reconstruction, the Joseph story was added to Genesis post-P.²⁷ Erhard Blum and Kristin Weingart similarly posit a unified Joseph story having been incorporated into the Genesis materials, likewise taking Genesis 37 as a literary unit, but isolating 37:1, 2 as belonging to P.²⁸ Franziska Ede

²² Donner, *Gestalt der Josephsgeschichte*, 24.

²³ Ibid., 17. He explains the so-called duplicates: "Doppelungen als Mittel kunstvoller Erzähltechnik."

²⁴ Donald B. Redford, *A Study of the Biblical Story of Joseph (Genesis 37–50)*, VTSup 20 (Leiden: Brill, 1970), 106–86, esp. 178–86. He identified the following texts as the original Joseph story: Genesis 37:3–36; 39–45; 46:28–47:31; 50:1–21 (p. 2). Cf. Walter Dietrich, *Die Josephserzählung als Novelle und Geschichtsschreibung: Zugleich ein Beitrag zur Pentateuchfrage*, BThSt 14 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1989); Norbert Kebekus, *Die Joseferzählung: Literarkritische und redaktionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zu Genesis 37–50*, Internationale Hochschulschriften (Münster: Waxmann, 1990). Other scholars take the Judah materials as the original version supplemented by a Reuben expansion. See Hans-Christoph Schmitt, *Die nichtpriesterliche Josephsgeschichte: Ein Beitrag zur neuesten Pentateuchkritik*, BZAW 154 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980; repr., Berlin: de Gruyter, 2018); Ulrike Schorn, *Ruben und das System der zwölf Stämme Israels: Redaktionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur Bedeutung des Erstgeborenen Jakobs*, BZAW 248 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997; repr., Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012).

²⁵ Thomas Römer, "The Joseph Story in the Book of Genesis: Pre-P or Post-P?", in *The Post-Priestly Pentateuch: New Perspectives on its Redactional Development and Theological Profiles*, eds. Federico Giuntoli and Konrad Schmid, FAT I 101 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 185–201.

²⁶ Römer reconstructs P's narration of Jacob's descent to Egypt as follows: Gen 37:1; 46:6–7; 49:1a, 28b–33; 50:12–13; Exod 1:1–5a, 7, 13 (Ibid., 200–1).

²⁷ Römer's Joseph story includes Gen 37*; 40–45*; 46:28–33; 47:1–12; 50:1–11, 14–21, 26 (Ibid., 189).

²⁸ Erhard Blum and Kristin Weingart, "The Joseph Story: Diaspora Novella or North-Israelite Narrative?", *ZAW* 129.4 (2017): 501–21.

proposes that in its original form the Joseph story was limited in focus to the fate of Joseph in Egypt, consisting of Genesis 37 and 39–41. She points to its narrative links from the patriarchal narratives (Gen 21:2, 7; 29–30; 32:29), which results in casting Joseph as the favored son and thus successor of Israel. The supplementary materials from Genesis 42–45 thus transform the narrative to become a story about fraternal conflict, while the journey of Israel to Egypt in Genesis 46–50 expands it into a “national-political” narrative linked with the subsequent exodus and conquest narratives.²⁹

Other scholars have similarly argued that the literary unity of the Joseph story undermines the documentary paradigm. Rather than reconciling the artistic quality of the Joseph story and the conclusions of Pentateuchal source analysis, a few years earlier Roger N. Whybray offered a different proposal in response to von Rad (see above)—a rejection of source analysis. As he boldly states, “it would seem we are forced to make a choice in our interpretation of the Joseph Story between the documentary hypothesis on the one hand and the view that it is a ‘novel’ of genius belonging to the category of wisdom literature on the other.”³⁰ Whybray chooses the latter, jettisoning the merits of the documentary approach. W. Lee Humphreys likewise emphasizes the literary unity of the Joseph story. Humphreys follows Gunkel and identifies it as a novella, but he rejects Gunkel’s reconstruction of its origin as a complex amalgamation of source material.³¹ A novella, when properly defined, constitutes “the literary creation of an individual, an artfully crafted piece from the hands of an author.”³² Regarding the Ishmaelite/Judah and Midianite/Reuben issue in Genesis 37, Humphreys believes it is best explained apart from a source division solution, instead concluding that it all comes down to whether the Ishmaelites and Midianites are one and the same or distinct entities. As he explains, “Attempts to explain the condition of the text in terms of the combination of two sources can only tell us how what we have received was formed and not how we are now to read what we have before us.”³³ Another narratological approach is that of Jan P. Fokkelman, who also argues

²⁹ Franziska Ede, “The Literary Development of the Joseph Story,” in *Book-Seams in the Hexateuch I: The Literary Transitions between the Books of Genesis/Exodus and Joshua/Judges*, eds. Christoph Berner and Harald Samuel, FAT I 120 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 103–20, esp. 118–20; idem, *Die Josefsgeschichte: Literarkritische und redaktionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur Entstehung von Gen 37–50*, BZAW 485 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016).

³⁰ Roger N. Whybray, “The Joseph Story and Pentateuchal Criticism,” *VT* 18.4 (1968): 528.

³¹ W. Lee Humphreys, *Joseph and His Family: A Literary Study*, Studies on personalities of the Old Testament (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), 3–12.

³² Ibid., 27.

³³ Ibid., 36.

for the literary artistry and unity of Genesis 37 (and 38).³⁴ He organizes the narrative components of verses 18–33 as a chiasm with Judah’s counterproposal to sell Joseph to the Ishmaelite caravan (vv. 26–27) as the interpretive center of the text³⁵:

A	vv. 18–20	conspiracy of brothers to kill Joseph
B	vv. 21–22	Reuben’s proposal to throw Joseph into the pit
C	vv. 23–24	brothers cast Joseph into the pit
D	v. 25	caravan passes by
X	vv. 26–27	Judah’s counterproposal to sell Joseph
D’	v. 28	brothers sell Joseph to caravan
C’	v. 29	Reuben finds empty pit and tears his clothes
B’	v. 30	Reuben mourns and addresses brothers
A’	vv. 31–33	brothers deceive Jacob, reporting Joseph as dead

The role of Judah is taken up in the Tamar narrative of Genesis 38 (not a digression, according to Fokkelman), as well as his speech to Joseph on behalf of the brothers in Genesis 45, the longest reported speech in the Joseph story.³⁶

The above survey demonstrates that the traditional source divisions proposed by documentarians for Genesis 37 are not without difficulty. Both supplementary and narratological treatments of the Joseph story reject the plausibility of the J/E divisions. For the remainder of this discussion, we will consider the relevance of cohesion and coherence in evaluating Genesis 37 as a literary unit.

NARRATIVE COHESION AND COHERENCE

The above overview of scholarship on Genesis 37 demonstrates a wide variety of approaches to interpreting this narrative, ranging from documentary, to supplementary, to narrative approaches. Jeffrey Stackert uses coherence theory to support the classic source divisions of documentarians. He assumes that many (if not all) of the narrative complexities attested throughout the Pentateuch reflect contradictory information that modern readers must overcome in making sense of the text. He appeals to social-science studies on how readers experience cohesion, coherence, and contradiction in their

³⁴ See Jan P. Fokkelman, “Genesis 37 and 38 at the Interface of Structural Analysis and Hermeneutics,” in *Literary Structure and Rhetorical Strategies in the Hebrew Bible*, eds. Lénart J. de Regt, Jan de Waard, and Jan P. Fokkelman (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1996), 152–87.

³⁵ Fokkelman, “Interface,” 162; idem, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide*, trans. Ineke Smit, Tools for Biblical Study 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 80.

³⁶ Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 81.

interpretation of texts.³⁷ Scholarship has typically distinguished between cohesion as a textual property and coherence as a cognitive property. Tonya Reinhart's comments are representative: cohesion is the "overt linguistic devices for putting sentences together," whereas coherence "is a matter of semantic and pragmatic relations in the text."³⁸ We will comment briefly on the nature of cohesion and coherence and their relevance for Genesis 37.

First, the importance of cohesion as a textual phenomenon is treated extensively in the influential study of Michael A. K. Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan. Cohesion constitutes "a semantic relation between an element in the text and some other element that is crucial to the interpretation of it."³⁹ They outline five types of cohesive features: reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunctions, and lexical cohesion, elaborating further:

Each of these categories is represented in the text by particular features—repetitions, omissions, occurrences of certain words and constructions—which have in common the property of signaling that the interpretation of the passage in question depends on something else. If that 'something else' is verbally explicit, then there is cohesion.⁴⁰

Sometimes, lexical links are emphasized over other types of cohesion. However, lexical linkages in any given text must be considered in light of corresponding referential links for a text to be cohesive. The repetition of words is not enough—they must share the same reference points in the text. Furthermore, one text can exhibit multiple lexical links each with their own reference points, since individual texts can cover more than one topic.⁴¹ According to Anita Fetzer, these individual types of cohesion demarcation fall into three broader categories: grammatical, lexical, and instantial. In this framework, *grammatical cohesion* entails reference, ellipsis, substitution, and conjunction, *lexical cohesion* involves synonym, antonym, metonymy, collocation, repetition, etc., and *intstantial cohesion* refers to logical connections existing within a given text.⁴²

Conversely, textual coherence focuses on cognitive processes involving the logical inferences of the reader yielding a meaningful sequence of linguistic units.⁴³ As Elizabeth Robar notes, coherence

³⁷ Stackert, "Pentateuchal Coherence," 253–68.

³⁸ Tanya Reinhart, "Conditions for Text Coherence," *Poetics Today* 1.4 (1980): 163.

³⁹ Michael A. K. Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan, *Cohesion in English*, English Language Series (London: Routledge, 1976), 8.

⁴⁰ Halliday and Hasan, *Cohesion*, 13.

⁴¹ Reinhart, "Conditions," 171–2.

⁴² Anita Fetzer, "Textual Coherence as a Pragmatic Phenomenon," in *The Cambridge Handbook of Pragmatics*, eds. Keith Allan and Kasia M. Jaszczolt, *Cambridge Handbooks in Language and Linguistics* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 447.

⁴³ Fetzer, "Textual Coherence," 448, 460.

refers to the reader's "mental representation" of a text, supplying "any missing elements necessary to construct a unitary representation" so as to perceive that text as coherent. The reader who is unable to do so conversely perceives the text as incoherent.⁴⁴ According to Reinhart, the following stipulations must exist for a text to be read coherently: connectedness (cohesion), consistency, and relevance. Consistency, for Reinhart, means "that each sentence will be consistent with the previous sentences, i.e., all true in the same state of affairs (given our common assumptions about the world)." Furthermore, the relevance of the material within the text should exhibit a proper relationship between "sentences and an underlying discourse topic, or theme, as well as their relations with the context of the utterance."⁴⁵ Rachel Giora advances Reinhart's approach, framing coherence as the requirement of two conditions—(a) and either (b) or (c):

- a) The text is consistent (according to the definition of Reinhart above),
- and
- b) The materials within the text are topically relevant,
- or
- c) The text marks topic digressions with explicit connectors.⁴⁶

Another factor in the coherence of written texts concerns the reader's ability to find meaningful connections that contribute to its overall coherence. *Local coherence* refers to connections between individual constituents within a clause and the relationship between adjacent clauses. *Global coherence* means the reader can establish meaningful relations beyond sentence or paragraph divisions.⁴⁷ The basis for these distinctions is grounded in memory theory—or activated information—which says that readers achieve local coherence as they encounter details in the text consistent with the information currently accessible in short-term memory.⁴⁸ The correlation of these details fosters a sense of coherence. Global coherence requires the resumption of information encountered several sentences or paragraphs earlier, since it is no longer current in the mind. Difficulty

⁴⁴ Elizabeth Robar, "Cohesion and Coherence," in *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics Online*, ed. Geoffrey Khan (Leiden: Brill, 2013, https://doi.org/10.1163/2212-4241_ehl_EHLL_SIM_000569).

⁴⁵ Reinhart, "Conditions," 164.

⁴⁶ Rachel Giora, "Notes Towards a Theory of Text Coherence," *Poetics Today* 6.4 (1985): 707–8.

⁴⁷ Stackert, "Pentateuchal Coherence," 254–5.

⁴⁸ See Alan Baddeley, "Working Memory," *Science* 255.5044 (1992): 556–69; idem, "Working Memory and Conscious Awareness," in *Theories of Memory*, eds. Alan F. Collins et al. (Hove, UK: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1993), 1:11–28, cited in Stackert, "Pentateuchal Coherence," 255.

arises when the reader encounters new information that appears to be inconsistent with other details of the text, whether at the local or global levels.⁴⁹

Andrew Teeter and William Tooman have recently criticized what they consider to be a false dichotomy between cohesion as a textual phenomenon and coherence as the cognitive inferences of the reader. Or to put it another way, cohesion is the property of a text, while coherence is the contribution of the reader, so that meaning becomes the construct of the reader. As they note, such a dichotomy is prone “to promote a serious misunderstanding.” Instead, coherence involves a back-and-forth between text and reader in a communicative event. Teeter and Tooman explain that coherence refers

to the compatibility between constituents of a text. Within this framework, “coherence” may apply to conceptual connectivity at multiple levels or extents of text, from the proposition, clause, and sentence (microstructural coherence) up to the complete text (macrostructural coherence). While readers perform an indispensable role in constituting that coherence, coherence cannot be separated from the text as a communicative strategy.⁵⁰

Giora’s assertion that a text’s cohesion cannot account for its coherence seems somewhat overstated.⁵¹ Robar’s nuanced framing of the relationship between the two reflects the similar concern of Teeter and Tooman: “the strength of the conceptual connection (coherence) is usually reflected in the strength of the linguistic connection (cohesion).”⁵²

Some scholars have attempted to use coherence theory in making historical arguments about a text’s authorship. Notable in this regard is Stackert’s application of coherence theory to Pentateuchal inconsistencies. Even though the reader may encounter certain discrepancies in the text, certain conditions have influenced him or her to find a coherent reading.⁵³ He appeals to what psychologists call partial matching, which, in short, refers to information overload: once the capacity of short-term memory has been maximized, the reader starts incorporating inconsistent information with the illusion of coherence.⁵⁴ Because many smaller units of the Pentateuch are not composite, Stackert argues, it conditions the reader to see coherence. Once readers encounter the so-called inconsistencies of composite narratives, they are already inclined to look for a coherent

⁴⁹ Stackert, “Pentateuchal Coherence,” 255.

⁵⁰ Teeter and Tooman, “Standards of (In)coherence,” 99, 100.

⁵¹ Giora, “Theory of Text Coherence,” 700.

⁵² Robar, “Cohesion and Coherence.”

⁵³ Stackert, “Pentateuchal Coherence,” 259.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 258, referencing the study of Heekyeong Park, and Lynne M. Reder, “Moses Illusion: Implications for Human Cognition,” in *Cognitive Illusions: A Handbook of Fallacies and Biases in Thinking, Judgement, and Memory*, ed. Rüdiger F. Pohl (Hove: Psychology Press, 2004), 275–92.

interpretation.⁵⁵ As Stackert explains, readers of the Pentateuch “are fully capable of suppressing or otherwise overlooking significant internal discrepancies in biblical texts in their pursuit of coherence.”⁵⁶

Unfortunately, Stackert does not establish the objective basis for judging what is inconsistent or contradictory in the text; he simply assumes incoherence, affirming, “the Pentateuch’s incomprehensibility is well established, having been demonstrated repeatedly and in its various parts.”⁵⁷ Stackert’s use of this theoretical framework cannot ultimately prove the composite nature of the Pentateuchal materials, however, since he already assumes inconsistency without definition. Reinhart’s definition of consistency and relevance are rather useful here (see above). Teeter and Tooman have similarly criticized this approach. They outline the various ways literary “unity” is incorporated into discussions about textual coherence, outlining three approaches: (1) unity (or lack of unity) as a “historical judgment regarding authorship and production”; (2) unity as a “judgment about textual features”; and (3) unity as an assumption or expectation one brings to the text, which enables the reader eventually to read a text coherently. Teeter and Tooman suggest that modern critical scholarship has assumed modern definitions of unity for ancient texts, whether it be documentary approaches arguing for textual disunity or literary approaches in favor of textual unity.⁵⁸ One must first define textual unity according to ancient literary standards before making historical judgments about authorship and literary unity.⁵⁹ Michael A. Lyons cites Genesis 37 as a prime example illustrating this problem—some scholars argue it is unreadable in its current form, while others are convinced that it is readable. But which position is correct? As Lyons proposes, “the only way to find out is to let the text itself be our guide, allowing its structure and features to inform us as to what constitutes tolerability or readability.” In many cases, Lyons notes, modern perceptions of unreadability may stem from incomplete information; apparent inconsistencies on the local level may in fact provide markers of coherence on the global level.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Stackert, “Pentateuchal Coherence,” 259.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 267.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 253.

⁵⁸ Teeter and Tooman, “Standards of (In)coherence,” 104–6.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* (112–4) cite the following recent efforts to assess ancient literary conventions of unity: Joshua A. Berman, *Inconsistency in the Torah: Ancient Literary Convention and the Limits of Source Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Raymond F. Person, Jr., and Robert Rezetko, *Empirical Models Challenging Biblical Criticism*, AIL 25 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016); Alexander Samely, *Profiling Jewish Literature in Antiquity: An Inventory, from Second Temple Texts to the Talmuds*, eds. idem et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 24–26.

⁶⁰ Lyons, “Standards of Cohesion,” 207.

In what remains, I will therefore attempt to follow Lyon's appeal to allow the text of Genesis 37 to inform our judgment regarding its readability. I propose the text contains several markers of cohesion (both local and global) that enable a coherent reading.⁶¹ I have adopted Fetzter's threefold categorization of cohesion—grammatical, lexical, and instantial—as an organizing framework. I will argue that the markers of cohesion embedded in the narrative provide a means of guiding the reader coherently through the twists and turns of the plot line.⁶² Furthermore, the narrative presentation of the Ishmaelites and Midianites/Medanites and the subtleties that have troubled modern interpreters may likewise demarcate meaningful connections, despite our distance from the historical and relational complexities of the story. This discussion will not make any claims regarding the authorship of Genesis 37, but instead focuses on the plausibility of coherence. In doing so, I will engage with the contention of documentarians that the proposed J/E source divisions offer a more coherent reading than the text in its final literary form. Rather, the J/E subdivisions eliminate meaningful narrative connections and thus yield subtle inconsistencies that obfuscate coherence.

NARRATIVE COHESION ACROSS SOURCE BOUNDARIES

One of the many problems with dividing this text into two independent accounts is that several narrative links transcend the proposed source divisions. I propose that these narrative connections constitute literary signs of cohesion linking various plot developments in the final form of the text. It is difficult to account for them if indeed these two stories were composed independently. The following discussion identifies several markers of cohesion according to Fretz's three-fold categorization—lexical, grammatical, and instantial. The first few examples contribute to local coherence. The last example in this section concerns global coherence.

LEXICAL COHESION

The combined version of the story presents several lexical links that cross the source boundaries proposed by documentarians, thus indicating literary cohesion. One of these lexical links occurs in the use

⁶¹ For a comparable application of cohesion and coherence to biblical literature, see the recent study of Colin M. Toffelmire, "Cohesion and Genre Blending in Prophetic Literature, Using Amos 5 as a Case Study," *JHS* 21 (2021): 1–23.

⁶² For instance, Fokkelman observes how the shift from Reuben to Judah marks a "decisive turn" in the plot line. The narrative plot about Joseph's search for his brothers in Dothan (vv. 12–18) is now usurped by the brothers' conspiracy against him. Within this context, the presentation of Reuben as spokesperson offering a proposal dramatically turns to Judah as spokesperson offering his counterproposal that the brothers eventually adopt. See Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 79.

of the verb בוא “to come, go”: יוֹסֵף אֶל-אֶחָיו “As Joseph came to his brothers” (v. 23). In the J story, verse 23 states, “As Joseph **came** to his brothers,” but the initial approach to the brothers is never stated. The only thing we have is the quoted speech of the brothers in verse 19: הִנֵּה בָּעַל הַחֲלֻמוֹת הֵלֵךְ בָּא “Look, here **comes** this master of dreams!” It is only in the combined text that any narrative reference to his approaching the brothers occurs.⁶³ In verse 18, the text says the brothers saw him from a distance, וּבָטְרוּם יִקְרַב אֲלֵיהֶם “before he approached them.” Verse 23 portrays Joseph’s arrival (בָּא...אֶל-אֶחָיו) and thus resumes the mention of his approach (בָּא, v. 19) from afar, now that they have deliberated about what they are going to do to him. The narrative description of the brothers seeing Joseph approach in verse 18 (E), וַיֵּרְאוּ אֹתוֹ מֵרֶחֶק “And they saw him from afar,” is tied semantically to the quoted speech of the brothers in verse 19 (J), utilizing the presentative particle: הִנֵּה בָּעַל הַחֲלֻמוֹת הֵלֵךְ “Look, this master of dreams.” The combined version of the story provides a series of lexical links that share a single reference point—the approach of Joseph. As independent narratives, however, such markers of cohesion are absent, resulting in two incoherent texts.

The verbal structure of Reuben’s proposal in verse 22 mirrors the speech of their deliberation in verse 20, offering a lexical link involving the root שָׁלַח, as well as the semantic link הִרְגוּ “slaughter” // שָׁפַךְ דָּם “shed blood”:

Brothers in J	Reuben in E
וְנִהְרְגָהוּ	אַל-תִּשְׁפֹּכוּ-דָם
“that we might slaughter him”	“Don’t shed blood”
וְנִשְׁלַכְהוּ	הִשְׁלִיכוּ אֹתוֹ
“that we might cast him”	“Cast him”

These two imperatives are introduced by another cohortative, this time in the mouth of Reuben: לֹא נִכְנֹוּ נָפֶשׁ “let us not strike him mortally” (v. 21). This counter-suggestion is in direct response to the cohortatives expressing the brothers’ deliberation with one another in verse 20. This feature suggests narrative intent to show Reuben’s attempt to outmaneuver his brothers. The cohortative is followed by two direct commands (one negative and one positive), as Reuben tries to assert influence over the group. These narrative links involve an artful interplay of volitive forms demonstrating persuasion and

⁶³ We should note that the movement of Joseph toward the location of his brothers is also mentioned in verses 14 (וַיָּבֹא שֶׁכֶּמָּה “he went to Shechem”) and 17 (וַיֵּלֶךְ יוֹסֵף אַחֲרֵי אֶחָיו “Joseph went after his brothers”), but documentarians attribute this material to E, not J (see Schwartz, “Compiler of the Pentateuch,” 266–7).

assertion within the group, again crossing proposed source boundaries.

Schwartz argues that the combined story of verses 21–24 is implausible because Joseph is thrown into the pit twice.⁶⁴ I fail to see how this reading is plausible. Similarly, Baden suggests the brothers decide to kill Joseph twice, once stated in narrative and once in dialogue.⁶⁵ Verse 20 combines two actions: slaughtering and casting the dead body into the pit. This intention is interrupted by Reuben's opposition. The reference to rescuing Joseph from their hands must mean he convinced his brothers not to murder Joseph. In response, he proposes that they cast him into the pit without slaughtering him first. The text, therefore, does not actually indicate Joseph was cast into the pit twice, but describes the brothers' deliberation about killing him and throwing him into the pit, and then narrates that they did indeed throw him into the pit, but without deciding to kill him.

In addition to Joseph approaching his brothers, the narrative describes another movement toward the scene of the action, this time involving the Ishmaelites. This material contains lexical links involving the verb *ראה* "to see," *הִנֵּה* "look," and *בוא* "to come." *וַיִּשְׂאוּ עֵינֵיהֶם וַיֵּרְאוּ* "They lifted up their eyes **and saw**" (v. 25). The language here indicates that the brothers saw the Ishmaelites approaching them from some distance, which parallels their seeing Joseph coming toward them in verse 18: *וַיֵּרְאוּ אֹתוֹ מֵרָחֹק* "They **saw** him from afar." Here, the Ishmaelites are introduced with the presentative particle *וַיֵּרְאוּ וְהִנֵּה אֶרְחַת שְׁמַעְיָאִלִים בָּאָה מִגִּלְעָד* "they **saw and look**: a band of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead." The context indicates they were moving toward the location of the brothers as they journeyed to Egypt (cf. Gen 33:1). The similarity in the way Joseph and the Ishmaelites are introduced to the narrative scene unites these verses together, again establishing linkage between the sources in the use of these three words:

Joseph's approach

"they **saw** (*וַיֵּרְאוּ*) him" (J)

"**look** (*הִנֵּה*), here **comes** (*בָּאָה*) this dreamer" (E)

Ishmaelites' approach

"they **saw**" (*וַיֵּרְאוּ*) (J)

"and **look** (*הִנֵּה*), a band of Ishmaelites **coming** (*בָּאָה*)" (J)

The lexical link is reinforced by the fact that the speech of the brothers announcing Joseph's approach and the narrative notice of the Ishmaelites are structurally parallel as well:

⁶⁴ Schwartz, "Compiler of the Pentateuch," 271.

⁶⁵ Baden, *Composition of the Pentateuch*, 3.

הִנֵּה בַעַל הַחֲלָמוֹת הָלֹךְ בָּא

Presentative particle
+ nominal agent

וְהִנֵּה אֶרְחַת יִשְׁמַעְאֵלִים בָּאָה

+ *Qal* participle

A final lexical link occurs in verses 29 and 34, tying together the responses of Reuben (E) and Jacob (J) to the disappearance of Joseph. In verse 29, Reuben discovers that Joseph is no longer in the pit, undermining his plan to rescue him and return him to his father. In response, he tears his garments: וַיִּקְרַע אֶת־בְּגָדָיו (v. 29). When the brothers lie to Jacob about what had happened to Joseph, Jacob likewise tore his garments: וַיִּקְרַע יַעֲקֹב שְׂמֹלְתָיו (v. 34). As with the other examples, this narrative connection transcends the proposed J and E divisions, demonstrating further evidence for the narrative's literary cohesion.

GRAMMATICAL COHESION

Subordination is one common indicator of grammatical cohesion cross-linguistically, though arguably less common in Hebrew.⁶⁶ The positioning of the adverbial וּבְטָרָם “now before” in verse 18 poses a syntactical problem for the source division. The fronted adverbial introduces a temporal subordinate clause dependent upon the independent verbal clause וַיִּתְנַבְּלוּ “they conspired with one another.” The logic of this temporal construction is as follows:

(temporal dependent clause)	וּבְטָרָם יִקְרַב אֵלֵיהֶם
(independent clause)	וַיִּתְנַבְּלוּ אִתּוֹ לְהַמִּיתוֹ

They had conspired (perfective) against him to put him to death

→ Before **he was drawing near** (imperfective) to them

The imperfective verb יִקְרַב “he was drawing near” depicts Joseph’s approach in progress, while the perfective verb וַיִּתְנַבְּלוּ “they had conspired” portrays the act of conspiracy as having been completed before Joseph reaches them.⁶⁷ Therefore, Reuben had to hear the brothers plotting prior to Joseph’s arrival as well.

⁶⁶ Robar, “Cohesion and Coherence.”

⁶⁷ Many scholars argue that prefix forms following בְּטָרָם should be interpreted as vestiges of earlier preterites. However, the only clear case to be made for a Hebrew preterite is the consecutive preterite. The historical preterite form was most likely the shortened form **yaqtulū* (vs. **yaqtulū*). Outside the consecutive preterite, shortened prefix forms are no longer detectable in Hebrew except in various weak roots (e.g., יָבֹא vs. יָבֵא). However, the distribution and function of these forms is inconsistent. For a full discussion of these forms and the relevant literature, see H. H. Hardy II and Matthew McAfee, *Going Deeper with Biblical Hebrew: An Intermediate Study of the Grammar and Syntax of the Old Testament* (Brentwood, TN: B & H Academic, 2024), 207–11. Even when these weak verbs follow the temporal particles אַז, טָרָם, or בְּטָרָם, one often finds the long form. For instance, the non-shortened prefix form תָּבֹא follows בְּטָרָם in Genesis 27:33: מִי־אֵפֹאֵה הוּא הַצֹּדֵעִיד וַיָּבֵא לִי וָאָכַל מִכָּל בְּטָרָם תָּבֹא וְאֶבְרַכְהוּ גַם־בְּרוּךְ יִהְיֶה: “Who then was he who hunted game, brought it to me, and I ate it all **before you were coming**? I blessed him. Indeed, he will be blessed.” The context suggests

In E's account, the introduction of Joseph approaching "from afar" is never resolved, since there is no mention of his arrival to the location of his brothers. The statement in verse 24 that "they took him" is rather abrupt in E since the narrative left him at a distance in verse 18. One might argue that the brothers had already seized him in verse 18 and that in verse 21 Reuben's rescuing him means that he seized Joseph from the hands of his brothers who had already begun attacking him physically. One problem with this scenario is the use of the verb *שמע*, indicating that Reuben "heard" his brothers' deliberation. The use of this verb suggests that Reuben overheard their plan, to which he responds with an alternative before they ever execute the initial plan.

The oddity of these circumstances is heightened even more by the fact that documentarians argue that in J the incident occurs close to home, but in E it occurs out in the fields away from home.⁶⁸ If this were the case, it is curious that J introduces Joseph as "coming" from somewhere. The brothers say, "here comes this dreamer" (v. 19), and then the narrative marks a temporal transition, "as he came" (v. 23). Where is he coming from if the events take place at the home-stead? The strangeness of this reconstruction is further heightened by the fact that E just so happens to state the brothers saw him from afar (v. 18), once again tying these verses together in such a way that ignores the proposed source divisions. The subordinate clause instead demonstrates a compelling case for grammatical cohesion.

INSTANTIAL COHESION

Fetzer defines instantial cohesion as "ties that are valid for only a particular text."⁶⁹ In this discussion, logical connectors appear to tie together sections of Genesis 37 that documentarians have attributed to independent sources.

The first logical connector we encounter in this text involves the statement *וַיִּשְׁמַע רְאוּבֵן* "Reuben heard" (v. 21). Documentarians typically assign all references to Judah to J and all references to Reuben to E. The result is that in the reconstructed E story, Reuben is said to have heard (v. 21), but it is unclear what he has heard. In the MT Reuben hears the deliberation of his brothers regarding whether they will kill Joseph: "Now come, let us kill him and cast him into one of the pits" (v. 20). This statement, however, has been assigned to the J story, which begins with the narrative description of the brothers' deliberation (v. 19) followed by the quoted rendition of their deliberation (v. 20). In the newly constructed E story, Reuben hears his own deliberation with his brothers. This is nonsensical narratively since the content of what Reuben heard is not given. The narrative flow of the MT is that, as the brothers deliberated, they

a past imperfective meaning: Before Esau was about to come to present himself before Isaac for his blessing, Jacob had already stolen it.

⁶⁸ Schwartz, "Compiler of the Pentateuch," 269.

⁶⁹ Fetzer, "Textual Coherence," 447.

came up with a plan to kill Joseph, which, as Reuben hears it, he determines to rescue Joseph from their hands. This is the function of the cohortative verbal forms following the initial imperative: לְכוּ וְנִהְרָגְהוּ וְנִשְׁלָכְהוּ בְּאֶחָד הַבְּרוֹת (v. 20). At this point in the narrative the plural cohortatives represent the collective reasoning of the group of brothers. Furthermore, they are reasoning, “each to his brother” (אִישׁ אֶל-אָחִיו). This is what Reuben hears. The nuance of the narrative presents a deliberation taking place among the brothers—they are speaking to one another. This internal deliberation prompts Reuben’s plan to rescue Joseph from his brothers surreptitiously. According to the E story, there is no way to distinguish Reuben from the group’s deliberation, narrated as “they conspired against him to kill him” (v. 18). There is nothing in the E narrative for Reuben to hear. Nonetheless, if one were to maintain the viability of a separate E story, it would require disjunctive syntax whereby to distinguish Reuben from the group’s deliberation (e.g., “But Reuben . . .”). The verb שמע is awkward here, and one would rather expect to read something like, “but Reuben determined to rescue him,” instead of the redundancy of stating he heard that he and his brothers planned to kill Joseph.

Another logical narrative connection exists between verses 18 (E) and 19 (J). The use of the *Hitpa'el* stem in verse 18 depicts the deliberation of the brothers: וַיִּתְנַבְּלוּ “they conspired together,” or “they conspired with one another.” The *Hitpa'el* in this context indicates reciprocal action, which in the MT anticipates אִישׁ אֶל-אָחִיו “each to his brother” in verse 19. At the very least, the reference to “each to his brother” further develops the use of the *Hitpa'el* in verse 18, crossing over the source boundary as proposed and marking cohesion.

Another example of instantial cohesion is found in the interplay between narrative description and direct discourse. This correspondence ties sections of the text together and is a prominent characteristic of Hebrew narrative. In such interplay, the narrative description is reinforced by the direct discourse of its characters. In other words, content introduced in narrative description is often repeated and/or reinforced by direct speech, and vice versa.⁷⁰ We outline the following examples from Genesis 37:18–36, which occur across the documentarian source boundaries:

Interplay between Direct Discourse and Narrative Description

⁷⁰ Note how the narrator fills out Reuben’s speech in v. 22 by identifying the motive behind the statement: וַיֵּד אֶל-תִּשְׁלָחוֹ-בּוֹ לְמַעַן הַצִּיל אֹתוֹ מִיָּדָם “‘But do not lay a hand on him,’ so as to rescue him from their hand and to return him to his father.” Fokkelman observes: “What comes after the dash is remarkable because it is not a full new sentence from the narrator, but a short clause, a declaration of purpose that as a narrator’s text does not belong to the words preceding the dash—these, after all, are character’s text” (Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 70).

E	They saw him from a distance (v. 18)	J	“Look, here comes this master of dreams” (v. 19)
J	“Let us cast him in one of the pits” (v. 20)	E	They cast him into the pit (v. 24)
E	They conspired together to put him to death (v. 18)	J	“Come, let us kill him” (v. 20)
J	“Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites” (v. 27)	J	They sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites (v. 28)
		E	The Midianites sold him unto Egypt (v. 36)

Robert Alter notes the primacy of dialogue in what he calls “dialogue-bound” narrative, meaning that narrative often mirrors elements from the dialogue of its characters, either introducing subsequent speech or confirming what has already been spoken.⁷¹ He further explains that it involves “the verbatim mirroring, confirming, subverting, or focusing on narration of statements made in direct discourse by the characters.”⁷² When little divergence occurs between narrative description and corresponding direct discourse, according to Alter, “the repetition generally has the effect of giving weight of emphasis to the specific terms which the speaker chooses for his speech.”⁷³

GLOBAL COHERENCE

Finally, we turn our attention to the broader context of the Joseph story where we find a statement that contributes to global coherence. Joseph’s confrontation of his brothers in chapter 42 is of particular interest. While Joseph’s identity is still concealed from his brothers, he accuses them of being spies and stipulates that they must leave behind one of their brothers to be imprisoned in Egypt upon their return to Canaan. Furthermore, should they return for more food, they must bring along their youngest brother Benjamin (vv. 9–17). As the brothers depart, with Simeon imprisoned in Egypt, they begin to lament their circumstances as God’s judgment against them for their treatment of Joseph (v. 21). Reuben speaks up in verse 22: **הָלוֹא אָמַרְתִּי אֲלֵיכֶם לֵאמֹר אֶל־תִּחַטְּאוּ בְּיָד וְלֹא שְׁמַעְתֶּם וְגַם־דָּמּוּ הֵנָּה נִדְרָשׁ:**

⁷¹ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, rev. and upd. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 82, 96–98.

⁷² Ibid., 96.

⁷³ Ibid.

“Did I not tell you, saying, ‘Do not sin against the boy,’ but you did not listen? Even his blood, look, is being sought after!” The significance of this statement is that Baden assigns it to J as part of a unified narrative depicting Joseph’s deception in chapters 42–45.⁷⁴ Chapters 37, 40, and 41 are assigned to E.⁷⁵ The proposed J story in Genesis 37, however, has no mention of Reuben, but only Judah. It is the E story where Reuben is mentioned, having returned secretly to the pit in order to rescue Joseph, only to find that he is gone. As Baden notes, Judah’s attempt to bring Benjamin to Joseph (43:8–10; 44:18–34) “marks the reversal of his leading role in the sale of Joseph in 37:26–27.”⁷⁶ Indeed it does, but also present is the narrative’s interest in the sibling rivalry between Judah and Reuben. This source division introduces an intrusive and contradictory element into J, one that can only exist in the combined narrative (J and E) read as a unit.

THE ISHMAELITES AND MIDIANITES

Documentarians claim that the presence of the Ishmaelites and Midianites in Genesis 37 is “irresolvable in any straightforward reading of the biblical text” and provides “the driving force behind the need for literary analysis of the chapter.”⁷⁷ The documentary approach asserts that it represents the strongest evidence against the text’s cohesion and coherence. Initially the text presents the Ishmaelites as a band of merchants making their way toward Egypt (vv. 25, 27, 28). Later, the text mentions Midianite traders who are somehow involved in the sale of Joseph (v. 28) and who are said to sell Joseph directly to Potiphar (v. 36). The Ishmaelites and Midianites, along with Judah and Reuben, become markers for the text’s source division.⁷⁸ The reference to the Midianites in verse 28 is reassigned to the Reuben materials of E; Judah and the Ishmaelites comprise J. Scholars adopting a supplementary approach reject this source division, instead arguing that the intrusion of the Midianites in verse 28 is simply an editorial addition.⁷⁹

Scholars have noted the grammatical difficulty of identifying the subjects of the following verbs in the canonical text: וַיִּמְשְׁכוּ “they drew out”; וַיַּעֲלוּ “they lifted up” (v. 28). Did the brothers draw Joseph out of the pit, or was it the Midianites? According to Baden, it

⁷⁴ Baden, *Composition of the Pentateuch*, 73.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 123.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 73.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 34.

⁷⁸ See Wellhausen, *Composition des Hexateuchs*, 52–53; Dillmann, *Die Genesis*, 404–6; Holzinger, *Genesis*, 223–4; and Gunkel, *Genesis*, 368.

⁷⁹ Blum and Weingart, “The Joseph Story,” 508; Erhard Blum, “Zwischen Literarkritik und Stilkritik: Die diachrone Analyse der literarischen Verbindung von Genesis und Exodus—im Gespräch mit Ludwig Schmidt,” *ZAW* 124.4 (2012): 499; Rainer Kessler, *Die Querverweise im Pentateuch: Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Untersuchung der expliziten Querverbindungen innerhalb des vorpriesterlichen Pentateuchs*, BEATAJ 59 (New York: Peter Lang, 2015), 98–99.

is the Midianites who pull Joseph from the pit and sell him to the Ishmaelites in the canonical form of the text.⁸⁰ He insists that the syntax demands that the Midianites are the subject of this series of verbs. As he argues, to “claim that it is in fact the brothers who pull Joseph from the pit or sell him to the Ishmaelites is to read somewhat against the grammar of the text,” even though most commentators have understood it this way.⁸¹ Even though the brothers decide to sell Joseph to the Ishmaelites in verse 27, the Midianites apparently pass by and frustrate the plans of Judah. This interpretation has a long history. Medieval Jewish commentators argued Joseph was sold multiple times to different entities (e.g., from the brothers to the Midianites to the Ishmaelites to Potiphar). For instance, *Genesis Rabbah* asked how many times Joseph was sold, citing Rabbi Judan who suggested four: “one when his brothers sold him to the Ishmaelites, one when the Ishmaelites sold him to the traders, one when the traders sold him to the Midianites, and one when the Midianites sold him to the Egyptians.”⁸² The result is a rather complicated narrative analysis.

Nonetheless, the narrative is grammatically ambiguous as to whether it was the brothers who drew Joseph out of the pit, or the Midianites/Ishmaelites.⁸³ In instances where the subject of the verb is not explicitly stated, it is usually the immediately preceding entity that serves as the subject, unless the context demands otherwise. In this context, the direct speech of the brothers in v. 27 indicates that the brothers instigate the sale of Joseph. The verb describing the Midianite merchants as “passing by” (וַיַּעֲבְרוּ, v. 28) calls the reader’s attention to the approaching Ishmaelites already introduced in the story, who also happen to be merchants (v. 25). Their entrance into the scene of the narrative stimulates the brothers’ plot in the first place. It is also telling that in 45:5 Joseph urges his brothers not to be dismayed, כִּי־מָכַרְתֶּם אֹתִי “because you sold me,” again implicating the brothers in the affair. Schwartz believes this text is “in total

⁸⁰ Baden, *Composition of the Pentateuch*, 3.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 251–2 n. 4.

⁸² *Bereishit Rabbah* 84:22, in Jacob Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis*, vol. 3, Brown Judaic Studies 106 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 201, also referenced in Baden, *Composition of the Pentateuch*, 5.

⁸³ See the insightful approach of Rendsburg, who suggests the narrative subtly shifts the focus to Joseph’s point of view from the bottom of the pit, unable to see what took place above. The text’s ambiguity in explicating who sold Joseph to whom intentionally portrays the confusion Joseph experienced, in one moment being thrown into the pit and in the next being hastily pulled from it (Rendsburg, *Bible*, 138). Greenstein also interprets the text as deliberately ambiguous at this juncture, in effect “blurring our image of what happened,” so that “the reader cannot be certain of what human events actually took Joseph down to Egypt” (Greenstein, “Reading of the Sale,” 122).

contradiction to the simple sense” of 37:28.⁸⁴ This conclusion is overstated. Rather, it provides another narrative indicator, consistent with Judah’s suggestion in verse 27, that the brothers are somehow involved in the sale of Joseph, thus contributing to the global coherence of the story. There are several ways the sale could have taken place. According to the above analysis, it is quite plausible to suggest that Joseph’s brothers and the Midianites are somehow involved in his being pulled from the pit and sold. As the text stands, the series of verbal forms (וַיִּמְשְׁכוּ “they drew out,” וַיַּעֲלוּ “they brought up,” וַיִּמְכְּרוּ “they sold,” וַיָּבִיאוּ “they brought”) do not explicate subjects, which means that context must guide the interpreter in sorting out the verbal actors.⁸⁵ From context, the brothers intend to sell Joseph to the Ishmaelites (v. 27), someone sells him to the Ishmaelites in exchange for money (v. 28), the Midianites sell him “unto Egypt” (v. 36), and the Ishmaelites transport him to Egypt (39:1).

The language utilized to express the Midianites selling Joseph requires further comment. The statement of sale is rather unusual: וְהַמְדָּנִים מָכְרוּ אֹתוֹ אֶל-מִצְרָיִם “Now the Medanites sold him unto Egypt” (v. 36). The unusual expression may provide another marker of grammatical cohesion. It is common in Hebrew for the root מכר to take prepositional complements involving ל “to sell X to Y,” ב “to sell in exchange for a price,” בְּיַד “to sell into the hand of X,” and others, but this passage utilizes the directional preposition אֶל “into, unto.” Furthermore, the object of the preposition is the place name מִצְרָיִם “Egypt.” The fronted nominal of this statement breaks from the mainline of the narrative marking background information. The nuance of selling Joseph “unto Egypt” indicates that the Midianites’ commercial transaction involving Joseph set in motion his movement “toward Egypt.”⁸⁶ This subtlety is oddly placed in the independent version of E, since no other actors in the exchange are involved. In the combined version of the story, however, the unusual wording underscores the complications of the commercial exchange, somehow involving the brothers, Ishmaelites, and Midianites. This interpretation correlates with Joseph’s statement to his brothers in Genesis 45:4, only here we find the directional ה instead: מְכַרְתֶּם אֹתִי

⁸⁴ Schwartz, “Compiler of the Pentateuch,” 272 n. 19.

⁸⁵ Rendsburg points out the unusual threefold repetition of אֶת-יוֹסֵף as the object of the last three verbs (they brought up *Joseph*; they sold *Joseph*; they brought *Joseph*). As he argues, were the pronominal suffix used for the second and third verbal forms (i.e., אֹתוֹ), the reader “would be forced to assume, with no evidence to the contrary, that whoever pulled Joseph out of the pit also sold him to the Ishmaelites” (Rendsburg, *Bible*, 138).

⁸⁶ Schwartz and Baden interpret the preposition אֶל here as “in”: “the Midianites sold him in Egypt” (Schwartz, “Compiler of the Pentateuch,” 267); Baden, *Composition of the Pentateuch*, 38. Baden incorrectly argues that “the notice that the Midianites brought Joseph to Egypt is provided in v. 36 for the first time” (262 n. 10). Nowhere in the text, whether in its combined or separated versions, does it mention the Midianites transporting Joseph to Egypt. That role is exclusively attributed to the Ishmaelites.

מִצְרַיִם “you sold me toward Egypt.” Again, the force of the expression involves movement toward the locale of Egypt, which in this case clearly does not mean that the brothers physically transported Joseph to Egypt.⁸⁷ Neither J nor E ever suggest such a scenario. Rather, these passages ultimately hold the brothers responsible, irrespective of the involvement of the Midianites or Ishmaelites.

Commentators have long noted the close association between the Midianites and Ishmaelites elsewhere in the Old Testament. Jewish medieval commentator Rashbam cited Genesis 25:2, which identifies Medan (and Midian) as one of the sons of Abraham by Keturah, making him a half-brother of Ishmael.⁸⁸ An even stronger association is made in Judges 8:24, where the Midianites are called Ishmaelites, which led Abraham Ibn Ezra to conclude, “So it says about the kings of Midian that they were Ishmaelites.”⁸⁹ Baden rejects Ibn Ezra’s equivalency as unlikely, and rather proposes that the contemporary audience’s impression would have been more likely that “these Midianite people are like the well-known Ishmaelites—rather than, as Ibn Ezra read it, an actual historical or ethnological identification.”⁹⁰ The problem with this assessment is that Judges 8:24 does not say they were like Ishmaelites, but that they *were* Ishmaelites. It is a predicate statement with no marker of comparison: כִּי יִשְׁמָעֵאִלִים הֵם “for they were Ishmaelites.”

Ancient sources outside the Old Testament also attest a connection between the Midianites and Ishmaelites. Equating the two names with one group is likely an oversimplification, just as demanding that they are two separate and unrelated groups ignores their association in the textual record. By the end of the second millennium BC, the Midianites are known to have existed as a smaller, geographically restricted group of “sedentary and semisedentary agriculturalists, pastoralists, craftsmen, and traders” in North Arabia.⁹¹ Greco-

⁸⁷ Stackert (idem, “Pentateuchal Coherence,” 262 n. 23) also mentions Joel 4:8 where אָל governs the verb מָכַר: מְכָרֵם אֶל-גּוֹי רָחוֹק: “they [Judah] will sell them [the sons and daughters of Tyre, Sidon, and Philistia] to the Sabeans unto a distant nation.” However, this text does not indicate that the sellers likewise transport the entity being sold, as documentarians argue for the Midianites in Genesis 37:36. In Joel 4:8, Judah sells the Canaanite sons and daughters to the Sabeans, which results in the sons and daughters being taken to a distant land. Once again, “to sell unto” cannot mean “to transport to.”

⁸⁸ See Rashbam on Genesis 37:36 in Eliyahu Munk, *Hachbut Hamesbulash: Commentaries on the Torah by Rabbeinu Chananel, Rabbi Sh’muel Ben Meir (Rash’bam), Rabbi David Kimchi (R’dak), Rabbi Ovadiah Seferno*, Vol. 1 (New York: Lambda Publishers, 2003), also noted in Baden, *Composition of the Pentateuch*, 6.

⁸⁹ See Abraham Ibn Ezra’s commentary on Genesis 37:28 in H. Norman Strickman and Arthur M. Silver, *Ibn Ezra’s Commentary on the Pentateuch: Genesis (Bereshit)* (New York: Menorah Publishing Co., 1988), also referenced in Baden, *Composition of the Pentateuch*, 6.

⁹⁰ Baden, *Composition of the Pentateuch*, 6.

⁹¹ See Ernst A. Knauf, *Midian: Untersuchungen zur Geschichte Palästinas und*

Roman and Arabic sources mention *Madiama* and *Madyan* in reference to cities east of the Gulf of Aqaba.⁹² Assyrian sources indicate a tribal confederacy of Ishmaelites extended all throughout North Arabia, eclipsing the Midianites from 1100 BC onward.⁹³ As William J. Dumbrell notes, there was considerable overlap between these two names during the ascendancy of the Ishmaelites. As he explains, the Midianite league of the Late Bronze Age “largely disappeared from the historical scene, giving way in the Transjordanian area to the Ishmaelites who begin to assume prominence there from the 11th century onward.”⁹⁴ George E. Mendenhall reasoned that once the Midianites had ceased to exist as a distinct social group, they “were identified with an ethnic group later called Ishmaelites.”⁹⁵ Nahum Sarna also sees these two entities as distinct yet closely related, arguing that “Ishmaelite” was an epithet for “nomadic traders” whereas “Midianite” was an ethnic affiliation.⁹⁶

A further complication occurs in the Hebrew spelling of Midianite in this passage. The Midianites are first mentioned in Genesis 37, verse 28 as מִדְיָנִים. The subsequent reference in verse 36, however, is הַמִּדְיָנִים, thus further substantiating the association of the proper name Medan with the ethnic designation Midian. It is likely that these two plural forms offer variant spellings of the same name.⁹⁷ These variants parallel the two sons of Keturah—מִדְן “Medan” and מִדְיָן “Midian”—in Genesis 25:2. This same spelling variation occurs in the plural forms of the noun מִדְוֹן “strife,” attesting both מִדְיָנִים (Prov 18:18) and מִדְיָנִים (Prov 6:19; 10:12).⁹⁸ Aside from the historical circumstances involving Joseph’s sale, the literary criteria for dividing Genesis 37 according to the simplistic formula Ishmael = J and Midian = E does not work.

Nordarabiens am Ende des 2. Jahrtausends v. Chr., ADPV (Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 1988), 517; idem, “Midianites and Ishmaelites,” in *Midian, Moab and Edom: The History and Archaeology of Late Bronze and Iron Age Jordan and North-West Arabia*, eds. John F. A. Sawyer and David J. A. Clines, JSOTSup 24 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1983), 147–62.

⁹² Knauf, *Midian*, 1.

⁹³ Ibid., 515.

⁹⁴ William J. Dumbrell, “Midian—A Land or League?” *VT* 25.2 (1975): 327.

⁹⁵ George E. Mendenhall, “Midian,” *ABD* 4:815. Note the similar approach of Fokkelman, who takes the Midianites as “a precise ethnic term referring to a tribe, while the name Ishmaelites is vague,” perhaps approximating the desert life of peoples often identified as “Arabs” (Fokkelman, “Interface,” 164 n. 20).

⁹⁶ Nahum H. Sarna, *Genesis*, JPSTC (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1989), 260.

⁹⁷ Already suggested by Dumbrell, “Midian,” 328–9.

⁹⁸ See “מִדְוֹן,” BDB, 193; “מִדְוֹן,” *HALOT*, 1:548; Dumbrell, “Midian,” 329 n. 17.

How problematic was the Ishmaelite/Midianite issue for earlier commentators? It is relevant here to comment on Baden's characterization of the perceived problem in this passage. He argues that many interpreters came to terms with these contradictions by simply eliminating the Midianites as a means of solving the problem.⁹⁹ He cites Josephus as an example, but it is unlikely that Josephus was eliminating the Midianite problem as Baden conceives it. The relevant passage simply reads:

But Judas, being one of Jacob's sons also, seeing some Arabians, of the posterity of Ishmael, carrying spices and Syrian wares out of the land of Gilead to the Egyptians, after Reubel was gone, advised his brethren to draw Joseph out of the pit, and sell him to the Arabians; for if he should die among strangers a great way off, they should be freed from this barbarous action. This, therefore, was resolved on; so they drew Joseph up out of the pit and sold him to the merchants for twenty pounds.¹⁰⁰

Josephus, rather than eliminating the Midianite problem, apparently links them with the Ishmaelites, or Arabians, as evidenced by the fact that he also references the merchants from verse 28. Doing so does not constitute a removal of the so-called problem, but instead constitutes a cohesive reading of the text. It is also consistent with the much older ancient Near Eastern tradition of linking Midianite and Ishmaelite.¹⁰¹

The internal logic or instantial cohesion of Genesis 37 links the two groups together. Both are described by the narrative as merchants. When the Ishmaelites are introduced in verse 25, the narrative describes their merchant wares in detail: “their camels bearing gum, balsam, and myrrh, going down to Egypt.” Verse 28 gives a much more summary statement, utilizing the single word for “merchant” to describe the activity of the Midianites: סַחְרִים “traders” from the root meaning “to go around.”¹⁰² This linkage not only transcends the source boundaries but also identifies the two names with the same occupation—they are merchants.

Another similar link is found in Genesis 39:1, which documentarians consider to be an editorial insertion. The text reads: וַיֹּסֶף הוֹרֵד מִצְרַיִם וַיְקַנְהוּ פוֹטִיפָר סֵרִיס פְּרָעָה שֶׁר הַטַּבָּחִים אִישׁ מִצְרֵי מִד׃ הַיִּשְׁמְעֵאלִים אֲשֶׁר הוֹרְדָהוּ שָׁמָּה: “Now Joseph was brought down to Egypt and Potiphar, eunuch of Pharaoh, chief of the guards, an Egyptian man, purchased him from the hand of the Ishmaelites who brought him down there.” It is argued that this insertion is the redactor’s attempt to reconcile the E story, where Potiphar purchases

⁹⁹ Baden, *Composition of the Pentateuch*, 4.

¹⁰⁰ Josephus, *Ant.* 2.3.32–33 (Whiston, *The Works of Josephus*, 54–55).

¹⁰¹ This cultural/historical information further illustrates Steiner's proposed "cultural gaps" between ancient and modern readers (Steiner, "Contradictions," 447–53).

¹⁰² See “סחר,” *HALOT* 1:750.

Joseph, with the J story where the purchaser is not named.¹⁰³ The insertion or correction therefore attempts to assimilate the two stories into one unified narrative. According to this interpretation, “an Egyptian man” becomes redundant in the combined version of the story. As Baden explains, the redactor does not eliminate anything from his sources “unless it is in complete contradiction either to another source or to the combined canonical text.”¹⁰⁴ This so-called insertion or correction, however, does not actually correct anything in the combined text. As mentioned above, someone (the brothers or the Midianites) sells Joseph to the Ishmaelites in Genesis 37:28, whereas the Midianites sell Joseph “unto/toward Egypt” in 37:36. The statement in 39:1 is narratively marked as background/circumstantial information (structurally parallel to 37:36), clarifying that Joseph was transported to Egypt where Potiphar the Egyptian purchased him *מִיַּד הַיִּשְׁמְעֵאלִים אֲשֶׁר הוֹרְדָהוּ שָׁמָּה* “from the hand of the Ishmaelites who brought him down there.” Rather than correcting a contradiction, the text appears to offer clarification regarding the complicated circumstances involving Joseph’s exchange—both the Midianites and the Ishmaelites are involved. The statement contributes to the global coherence of the story. As a separated narrative, however, the nuanced wording of 37:28 in E is somewhat incoherent: what would it mean to sell Joseph “unto Egypt,” given the uniqueness of this expression in the Hebrew Bible?

The problem is less pronounced in the combined account, where the odd construction simply clarifies that the Midianites and Ishmaelites are both involved in the affair. It is plausible to reconstruct a scenario in which the brothers, somehow in coordination with the Midianites who appeared on the scene, sell Joseph to the Ishmaelites. It is also possible that the Midianites could have functioned as a local intermediary between the brothers and the Ishmaelites, given the historical relationship between them.¹⁰⁵ Accordingly,

¹⁰³ See Wellhausen, *Composition des Hexateuchs*, 54; Dillmann, *Die Genesis*, 354–5; Joseph E. Carpenter and George Harford, *The Composition of the Hexateuch: An Introduction with Select Lists of Words and Phrases* (London: Longmans, Green, 1902), 51–52; Driver, *The Book of Genesis: With Introduction and Notes by S. R. Driver, D.D.*, 4th ed., Westminster Commentaries (London: Methuen, 1905), 333; John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*, ICC (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1910), 457 n. 1; Joel S. Baden, *J, E, and the Redaction of the Pentateuch*, FAT 68 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 268.

¹⁰⁴ Baden, *Redaction of the Pentateuch*, 268.

¹⁰⁵ Ina Willi-Plein suggests the “shady” (*zwielichtigen*) Midianites found Joseph stranded in the pit and surreptitiously sold him to the Ishmaelites without the brothers’ knowledge. In this reconstruction, Reuben discovers that Joseph is missing and reports it to his brothers who likewise are unaware that he is gone. See Willi-Plein, *Das Buch Genesis: Kapitel 12–50*, NSKAT 1, 2 (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2011), 249–50. The only

the Ishmaelites then physically transport Joseph to Egypt, as 39:1 indicates, where the Ishmaelites govern the verb of movement אָשַׁר הוֹרְדָהוּ שָׁמָּה “who brought him down there,” thus marking grammatical cohesion. The references to the Midianites/Medanites in 37:28, 36 focus on their role in the financial transaction. In 37:28 they sell Joseph to Ishmaelites who transport Joseph to Egypt. When all these references to Midianites/Medanites and Ishmaelites are read together, they present a complex but coherent situation, maintaining that the Midianites/Medanites sell (37:28, 36) while the Ishmaelites transport (37:28; 39:1).

The above historical reconstruction is admittedly incomplete given the fact that many details are left unstated in the narrative. The historical setting of this exchange lies in the background of the passage and is not the foremost interest of the narrator. However, the historical complications of the story are tolerated in the otherwise clear outline and progression of the Joseph story because this episode uniquely sets the plot of the larger narrative in motion—the sale of Joseph becomes the means of God’s preservation of his people through famine (cf. 45:5; 50:19–20). The fact that the parties involved in this affair were close (Reuben, Judah, the other brothers) and distant (Ishmaelites, and Midianites, both being descendants of Abraham, according to 25:1–2, 12) relations “serves to heighten the tragedy” of the story.¹⁰⁶ These circumstances also play a crucial role in demonstrating Judah’s emergence as a leader instead of the elder brother Reuben.¹⁰⁷

This reconstruction also demonstrates that the text can be read coherently in the literary form that has come down to us, contrary to those who claim its indisputable incoherence. Furthermore, our knowledge about the Midianites and Ishmaelites from ancient Near Eastern sources makes the combined text a plausible representation of historical circumstances. At the very least, the ability of the documentary proposal to posit literary seams reflecting originally independent sources does not prove that such literary divisions necessarily existed. If anything, a close reading of the combined version of the story yields several obstacles for such a reading, namely, what appear to be markers of cohesion: narrative links crossing source boundaries and narrative subtleties reflecting complex historical realities.¹⁰⁸ This realization not only relates to the interrelatedness of Ishmaelites and Midianites/Medanites known from ancient sources

difference between Willi-Plein’s accounting of the incident and the one envisioned here is that she proposes the brothers did not know how Joseph disappeared, being completely unaware of the Midianite sale to the Ishmaelites. Similarly, see Horst Seebass, *Genesis III: Josephsgeschichte (37,1–50,26)* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2000), 23. One problem with this interpretation is that it does not account for Joseph’s statement in 45:4 that the brothers sold him “unto Egypt” (see discussion above).

¹⁰⁶ Sarna, *Genesis*, 260.

¹⁰⁷ See Sarna, *Genesis*, 260–1.

¹⁰⁸ Similar to Steiner, “Contradictions,” 443–53.

but may also arise from the complexities of human interaction. To put it another way, literary complexities do not necessarily constitute literary seams. One might even argue that predictably transparent literature void of any twists and turns in its plot development lacks the kind of literary depth that is able to draw the reader into the world of the story.

SUMMARY OBSERVATIONS

As the above discussion illustrates, narrative connections marking literary cohesion are observable between J and E materials, thus undermining the legitimacy of the proposed source divisions of documentarians. Whatever problems one may encounter in the narrative of Genesis 37:18–26, the Documentary Hypothesis does not provide the most satisfying means of answering them. The literary analysis of the proposed composite narrative J/E relies heavily upon the Ishmaelite/Midianite interchange in the text as a means of triggering source division. Thereafter the names Judah and Reuben offer further evidence for the existence of J and E respectively. The so-called inconsistency of the sale of Joseph boils down to the usage of the gentilics “Ishmaelites” and “Midianites,” which also provides the basis for dividing the text into its underlying sources. Other narrative inconsistencies like the livelihood of the Jacob’s household (farmers vs. shepherders) or how many times Joseph was thrown into the pit are illusory. These purported inconsistencies appear to be read into the text in a way that avoids coherent readings that are both justifiable contextually via cohesion markers and plausible historically. Such readings lend credibility to those who have argued in favor of the literary coherence of the sale of Joseph.