ABSTRACT

“Much More Ours Than Yours”: The Figure of Joseph the Patriarch in the New Testament and the Early Church

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This paper investigates the figure of Joseph the patriarch in early Christian interpretation, demonstrating the importance of such figures in articulating a Christian reading of the history of Israel, and the importance of this reading in the identity formation of early Christianity. The paper also illumines the debt of this Christian reading of Israel’s history to the work of Hellenistic Judaism. The figure of Joseph the patriarch is traced through early Christian interpretation, primarily from the Eastern Church tradition up to the 4th century C.E. The key methodological approach is an analysis of how the early church employed typological, allegorical, and moral exegesis in its construction of Joseph as a “Christian saint of the Old Testament.” A figure who, to borrow Justin Martyr’s phrase, became in the Christian identity “much more ours than yours.”
“Much More Ours Than Yours”: The Figure of Joseph the Patriarch in the New Testament and the Early Church

A Thesis

Submitted to the
Faculty of Miami University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of History

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2004

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Introduction

One of the enduring questions that the early church struggled with was how to make the Jewish scriptures a part of the story of the church. “This task was such a top priority throughout this period that the history of exegesis can very largely be written in terms of it alone.”\(^1\) Justin Martyr argued with Trypho the Jew, in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, that “the Scriptures are much more ours than yours. For we let ourselves be persuaded by them, while you read them without grasping their true import.”\(^2\) This was an audacious claim to make by Justin, for “the Scripture” he spoke of was the very text of the Old Testament- the history of the Jewish people. How then could the text that recorded Jewish history no longer be the sole provenance of the Jewish people? How did the early Christians come to see themselves as the true inheritors of the traditions of Israel? And, why was the relationship of the early church to these Scriptures such an important part of their identity? In short, how did the early church go about the task of trying to make the Jewish Scriptures, “much more ours than yours”? This paper will try to partly answer these questions by analyzing the way the figure of Joseph the Patriarch was interpreted in the early church. If the early church was to claim the history of Israel as its own, then it must claim the key figures in Israel’s past. The figure of Joseph had inspired a wealth of interpretations in Hellenistic Jewish and later rabbinic exegesis.\(^3\) Likewise, the early church fathers found Joseph to be a worthy subject for study, and he became a key figure in the allegorical, typological, and moral exegesis of early Christian texts.\(^4\)

Early Christian Hermeneutics

Before looking at the patristic interpretation of the figure of Joseph, it is first necessary to gain a general understanding of the hermeneutics of the early church. Adding nuance to the question of how to claim the Jewish scriptures was the early

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church’s realization that they must find a mediating position between two perceived extremes in approaching the Old Testament. Joseph Trigg noted that on the one hand, “Jews condemned Christians for retaining the Old Testament as Scripture, but not observing the ordinances of the Law.”\(^5\) On the other hand, however, the “Gnostics who contended that the God of the old Testament was not the same deity as the God and Father of Jesus Christ, condemned them for retaining the Old Testament at all.”\(^6\) For the Jews, the Christians’ new way of approaching the scriptures was not in concert with their ancient traditions, and for the Gnostics, adherence to the Old Testament was an old, outdated belief in an evil, capricious God. Thus for biblical interpreters in the early church, the task was according to Robert Wilken, “to show what was old and what was new about the Christian revelation and interpretation of the Bible.”\(^7\)

One way in which the church responded to this challenge was by interpreting the Old Testament through a Christocentric perspective. Gerald Bray noted that within the early patristic authors, “Many writings of this period reveal that the church generally regarded the Jewish scriptures as prophetic of Christ, who appeared in them under the guise of various types.”\(^8\) The patristic writers thus scoured the text of the Old Testament looking for persons, names, places, objects, etc., that would point to Christ. This method of interpretation did not just begin in the patristic authors, but was rooted in the way that the New Testament writers approached their exegesis of the Old Testament. Richard Longenecker noted that in the preaching of the early church, as recorded in the New Testament, there was no “clear consciousness of employing various methods of interpretation in quoting the Old Testament.”\(^9\) However, Longenecker went on to qualify this noting, “What they were conscious of…was interpreting the Scriptures from a Christocentric perspective, in conformity with the exegetical teaching and example of Jesus, and along Christological lines.”\(^10\)

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\(^6\) Ibid.
\(^8\) Bray, 78. Note J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 71, where he insists that typology does not overlook the history of the type, but takes it very seriously (contra allegorical interpretation).
\(^10\) Ibid.
The most obvious example of this Christocentric hermeneutic employed by Jesus can be found in Luke 24. Here the writer recorded that the risen Jesus appeared to two disciples walking along the road to the small village of Emmaus. The two travelers, troubled by the recent events in Jerusalem, were discussing the death and burial of Jesus, and the reports that his tomb had been found empty. Jesus, who was not recognized by the two travelers, rebuked them for their slowness to believe the testimony of the prophets. “Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?”¹¹ The writer then noted that Jesus gave the travelers a survey of the Old Testament, “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in the Scriptures concerning himself.”¹² Jesus was thus, in Luke’s rendering of the tale, interpreting the Old Testament scriptures, “Moses and all the prophets,” as having specific references to his life and ministry. Jesus saw the Old Testament texts as pointing to and being fulfilled in him. In short, he was interpreting them Christocentrically. The early church then continued this tradition of searching the Old Testament for signs of Christ- a process that began with Jesus and the apostolic teaching. J. N. D. Kelly has noted that Luke 24 is an important indicator of the early church’s understanding that, all the events of Christ’s earthly career, together with their profound redemptive implications, are to be understood as the fulfillment of what was written about Him ‘in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms’, and that the ultimate warrant for this conviction was His own express authorization.¹³

Rowan Greer noted that by the time of Irenaeus (d. c. 200), this approach to scripture became an effective way of mediating between the Jewish and Gnostic critiques. The Old Testament was a “sacred history presided over by God’s providence,” and the Scriptures were a “providential dispensation of God, pointing beyond themselves to their consummation in Christian revelation.”¹⁴ Thus against the Gnostics the early church argued that the Old Testament was important as the salvation history which pointed ultimately to Christ. And, against the Jews they argued that this salvation history, charted

¹¹ Luke 24.26. All Scripture quotations from the New International Version, unless otherwise noted.
¹² Luke 24.27. Note also Luke 24.45 where Jesus appeared to the disciples and “opened their minds so that they could understand the Scriptures.”
through the Old Testament, was realized in the coming of Christ, superceding the Mosaic law and covenant now consummated in Christ. Irenaeus confirmed this view in his treatise *Against Heresies*, where he noted,

> If any one, therefore, reads the Scriptures with attention, he will find in them an account of Christ, and a foreshadowing of the new calling. For Christ is the treasure which was hid in the field, that is, in this world (for the “field is the world”); but the treasure hid in the Scriptures is Christ, since he was pointed out by means of types and parables.\(^\text{15}\)

The early church therefore saw Christ as the key to linking themselves to the history of Israel.\(^\text{16}\) This was especially true in the Hebrew prophecies of the coming Messiah. Thus in Matthew’s gospel, there was repeated mention of events in the life of Christ as fulfilling “what was said through the prophets.”\(^\text{17}\) However, the Jews argued that the Christians’ methodology of seeing Christ as the consummation of messianic prophecies was faulty, because he had not fulfilled all of them. For example, Robert Wilken noted that “the Jews contended that the wolf had not lain down with the lamb because Messiah had not come.”\(^\text{18}\) The writers of the early church responded to this, according to Wilken, by emphasizing that the Old Testament Scriptures should be interpreted spiritually, not literally.\(^\text{19}\) The patristic writers drew upon Paul’s warning that Christian ministers were “ministers of a new covenant- not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”\(^\text{20}\) Origen was one example of this. He noted in *On the First Things* that “Now the reason why all those we have mentioned hold false opinions and make impious or ignorant assertions about God appears to be nothing else but this, that scripture is not understood in its spiritual sense, but is interpreted according to the bare letter.”\(^\text{21}\) Gerald Bray noted that the use of this text,

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\(^{16}\) See Peter Richardson, *Israel in the Apostolic Church* (London: Cambridge U.P., 1969), 204-06. Richardson argued that the early church’s claim to be the “true Israel” was based in part upon “a developed Christology,” which identified Christ as fulfilling the promises to Israel and initiating a new covenant (206).

\(^{17}\) See as an example the first two chapters of Matthew, where the phrase is used four times (1.22, 2.15, 17, 23). Note also a later example of this in Eusebius *Preparation for the Gospel* 8d.


\(^{19}\) Ibid.

\(^{20}\) 2 Cor 3.6.

became axiomatic for the fathers of the early church. To them, what Paul meant was that the literalistic exegesis of Scripture, as practiced by the rabbis was deadly. Only the spiritual understanding which they understood as radically Christological, was true.  

Bray concluded that all patristic interpreters “agreed that a spiritual interpretation was essential, and that to interpret Scripture in a merely literal way was to fall back into Judaism and spiritual bondage.”

Another method used by the early church to lay claim on the Jewish Scriptures was an apologetic focused on the denigration of some elements in the history of Israel. The early church viewed the Old Testament as supplying a negative critique of the Jews. The Old Testament was “the history of a people with an ineradicable capacity for apostasy, despite the continual warnings of the prophets.” The Mosaic laws were “a special discipline temporarily imposed” because of the Jewish proclivity toward syncretism with the surrounding nations, “but not intended to be taken as God’s first or last word.”

Eusebius (c.260-c.340 C.E.), the bishop of Caesarea and famous church historian provided an example of this tendency. In his *Preparation for the Gospel*, Eusebius noted that Moses,

promulgates a law that was suited to the moral condition of those who heard it. For they were unable through moral weakness to emulate the virtue of their fathers, inasmuch they were enslaved by passions and sick in soul; so He gave them the polity that corresponded to their condition.

What then did this attack on Israel’s history mean for the Jewish people? There was only one conclusion for the early church, since they claimed that the Law was a temporary measure, and as Irenaeus argued, the Old Testament Scriptures truly pointed toward Christ. Trypho, the Jewish interlocutor with Justin Martyr in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, anticipated this conclusion, asking Justin “What then…are you Israel?”

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23 Ibid.
answer from the early church was “yes.”\textsuperscript{28} The Epistle of Barnabas, speaking of the Jews, exhorted its readers,

\begin{quote}
do not be like certain people; that is, do not continue to pile up your sins while claiming that your covenant is irrevocably yours, because in fact those people lost it completely…their covenant was broken in pieces, in order that the covenant of the beloved Jesus might be sealed in our heart.\textsuperscript{29}
\end{quote}

The early church viewed itself as the true Israel, given a new and lasting covenant with God through Christ Jesus.\textsuperscript{30} As Eusebius noted, the Jews,

\begin{quote}
find fault with us, that being strangers and aliens we misuse their books, which do not belong to us at all, and because in an impudent and shameless way, as they would say, we thrust ourselves in, and try violently to thrust out the true family and kindred from their own ancestral rights.\textsuperscript{31}
\end{quote}

\section*{The Aura of Antiquity}

Why was the issue of the early church clarifying its relationship to the Hebrew Scriptures of such importance to early Christian writers? Why the continued emphasis on the continuity between the history of Israel and the early church? Louis Feldman has argued that the reason for this on-going emphasis is not immediately clear, particularly when one looks at the differences between the two traditions. Feldman noted that Christianity and Judaism differ:

\begin{quote}
in creed, i.e., in believing that Jesus was the Messiah, that he was divine, that he died for man’s sins, that salvation can come through accepting Jesus, and in deed, i.e., in not accepting the Halakhic (legal) basis, whether in the written or oral Torah, so central to classical Judaism.\textsuperscript{32}
\end{quote}

Feldman also argues that even more important than the above differences, was the fact that Christianity and Judaism differ in their fundamental “essence:” Christianity was the

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{See Richardson, \textit{Israel in the Apostolic Church}, 31. Richardson argued that from the time of the New Testament onward, there is an emphasis in early Christianity on the church inheriting the promises to Israel. As such, in references to the relationship between Israel and the church there was “a growing, though not uniform, tendency to emphasize discontinuity and to forgo continuity.” This came to full fruition in the writings of Justin Martyr who, according to Richardson, was the first to identify the church as the “true Israel”\textsuperscript{(31)}.}
\footnote{See the early development of this idea in Mk 14.24; Lk 22.20; 1Cor 11.25; 2Cor 3.6; Heb 8:6, 8, 9:15, 12.24.}
\footnote{Eusebius, \textit{Preparation for the Gospel} 5d, 6.}
\end{footnotes}
“first ‘pure’ religion” without a basis in a national identity.33 Jews, however, “historically have defined themselves as a people, a nation, a family…religion is an accoutrement of the nation.”34 Feldman concludes that the reason for this emphasis on continuity by the early church, in spite of the obvious differences between the two traditions, was the relatively new status of Christianity in comparison to other religions in the Greco-Roman world.35 Christianity emphasized continuity with the history of Israel and its Scriptures, in order to create for itself “the aura of antiquity.”36

That the issue of antiquity was an important one to religions in the Greco-Roman world has often been acknowledged. E. R. Dodds noted that interest in ancient traditions was fundamental to the Greco-Roman worldview: “Men stood with their backs to the future; all wisdom was in the past, that is to say in books, and their only task was one of interpretation.”37 Antiquity stood as a test for the veracity of any religious tradition, because “error disappears easily with the passage of time, whereas the core of truth remains.”38 This respect was also extended to the key figures of ancient religions, because “the men and women of earlier times, especially those who lived very long ago, were thought to have been closer to the gods.”39

Indeed, one of the most important arguments leveled against Christianity by its pagan critics was that it lacked antiquity. Eusebius acknowledged in his Preparation for the Gospel that one of the first objections raised by both Greek and Jews to Christianity was: “What then may the strangeness in us be, and what the new-fangled manner of life? And how can men fail to be in every way impious and atheistical, who have apostatized from those ancestral gods by whom every nation and state is sustained?”40 Celsus, the 2nd century apologist for Greek culture, argued that the Jews, because they followed their

33 Ibid., 197.
34 Ibid., 196.
35 Ibid.
38 Rokeah, Jews, Pagans, and Christians in Conflict, 90.
39 Robert Louis Wilken, The Christians as the Romans Saw Them (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 122. One example of this respect for ancient figures can be seen in the emphasis in early Christianity on connection with pre-Mosaic patriarchs such as Joseph. See the discussion below on Heb 11.
“traditional customs” were “In this respect…like the rest of mankind.”\textsuperscript{41} The Christians, however, were criticized by Celsus because they had rejected both Greek and Jewish traditions. And, according to Celsus, “it is impious to abandon the customs which have existed in each locality from the beginning.”\textsuperscript{42} Likewise, the 4\textsuperscript{th} century emperor Julian, labeled the “Apostate” for his rejection of Christianity, maligned the Christians as a sect (which he called the Galileans), because they followed none of the ancient traditions of the Hellenes or Hebrews. Instead, the Christians have “abandoned them and followed a way of their own.”\textsuperscript{43} As Arthur Droge noted, these attacks against Christianity carried with them the assumption that, “the assertion of modern origin was equivalent to the assertion of historical insignificance.”\textsuperscript{44}

The Apologetics of Hellenistic Judaism

What is interesting about the criticism leveled at Christianity concerning its lack of antiquity is that this was often contrasted with the Greco-Roman acceptance of the antiquity and traditions of the Jews. Thus, even a virulent anti-Semite as the 4\textsuperscript{th} century church father John Chrysostom had to begrudgingly acknowledge that, “Many, I know, respect the Jews and think that their present way of life is a venerable one.”\textsuperscript{45}

This respect accorded to Judaism, however, was not gained without struggle, and the nature of this struggle had important implications for the history of early Christianity. The increasing contact of Jews with the Hellenistic culture of the Greco-Roman world had aroused against Judaism its own set of criticisms maligning the history and traditions of its people. The famous Roman orator and senator, Cicero (106-43 B.C.E.), related in his speech \textit{De Provinciis Consularibus} that the Jews and Syrians were “people born to be

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{43} Julian, \textit{Against the Galileans}, trans. Wilmer Cave France Wright, \textit{The Works of the Emperor Julian} (New York: Macmillan, 1913), 43 A. Note also Suetonius’s criticism of the Christians in his \textit{Lives of the Caesars} as “a class of men given to a new and mischievous superstition.” As quoted in Wilken, \textit{The Christians as the Romans Saw Them}, 50.
slaves.”\(^{46}\) In another speech, Cicero referred to the conquest of the Jews by the Roman general Pompey, and then mockingly added concerning the Jewish state, “how dear it was to the immortal gods is shown by the fact that it has been conquered, let out for taxes, made a slave.”\(^{47}\) The Roman historian Tacitus (c. 54 -c.117 C.E.) even impugned the brief period of Jewish self-rule under the Maccabees before the conquest of Rome. He argued that these Jewish kings set up a “reign of terror which embraced, among other typical acts of despotism, the banishment of fellow-citizens, the destruction of cities, and the murder of brothers, wives and parents.”\(^{48}\) According to Tacitus, the Jews were an ethnic group that “regards as permissible what seems to us immoral,” and were thus a “lascivious people.”\(^{49}\)

For these writers the Jews were a powerless people, incapable of leadership, and little more than pawns in the struggle of history. Josephus recorded the Egyptian writer, Apion, as charging that the Jews “have not produced any geniuses, for example, inventors in arts and crafts or eminent sages.”\(^{50}\) All of these charges have as a background the commonly held myth of the origin of the Jews, articulated by various writers such as Manetho, Chaeremon, Lysimachus, and also Tacitus. This foundation myth has minor differences in each of these writers, but typically involves the expulsion of unwanted people from the land of Egypt. This expulsion comes as a result of an Egyptian god informing the pharaoh that the difficulties Egypt is experiencing can be resolved by expelling the impure, sickly, and leprous inhabitants of the land. These people after being expelled from the land eventually develop into the Jewish nation.\(^{51}\)

The response to these attacks on the history and traditions of Judaism was largely crafted by representatives of Hellenistic Judaism. These writers emphasized a “common

\(^{46}\) Cicero De Provinciis Consularibus 5.10. In Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism, vol. 1 edited by Menahem Stern (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1976).

\(^{47}\) Cicero Pro Flaccum 28.69.


\(^{49}\) Tacitus The Histories 5.4, 5.


\(^{51}\) Josephus Against Apion 1.227-250 (Manetho); 1.288-292 (Chaeremon); 1.304-311 (Lysimachus); Tacitus The Histories 5.3.
This emphasis on shared values allowed Hellenistic Jewish writers to, “present their religion in a way that invited the respect of such Greeks, and that expressed their own Hellenistic identity, without repudiating their own fundamental beliefs and values.”

Hellenistic Jewish writers focused on the ethical heritage of Judaism, and used key figures in the history of Israel as examples of these commonly shared values. For example, Philo praised the pre-Mosaic patriarchs of Israel’s history as men who derived their ethics from the dictates of nature: “they gladly accepted conformity with nature, holding that nature itself was, as indeed it is, the most venerable of statutes.” Particular figures were allegorized as idealized versions of common virtues. Thus, the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were “symbols of virtue acquired respectively by teaching, nature and practice.”

Central to the apologetic response of Hellenistic Jewish writers was an emphasis on the antiquity of the history and traditions of Judaism. As before noted this was of central importance in the Greco-Roman world, and all religious creeds were judged by this criterion: “The primary test of truth in religious matters was custom and tradition, the practices of the ancients.” Josephus, highlighted his focus on this key idea entitling his study of the history of Judaism as *Jewish Antiquities*, because “it will embrace our entire ancient history and political constitution.” In Josephus’ *Contra Apion* he made reference to his earlier work, noting that in this work he “made sufficiently clear to any who may peruse that work the extreme antiquity of our Jewish race, the purity of the

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53 Ibid., 157.

54 Philo, *On Abraham* 1.6. All quotations from Philo taken from Philo, *Works of Philo*, trans. F. H. Colson, G. H. Whitaker, and Ralph Marcus, *Loeb Classical Library*. (Heinemann, 1929). I have purposefully avoided specific references to the figure of Joseph in these examples. The use of Philo and Josephus (as well as other Hellenistic traditions) concerning Joseph in the writings of early Christianity will be demonstrated below.

55 Ibid., 11.52. Marcel Simon argued that, “Philo’s use of allegory sprang from a desire to make acceptable to cultivated gentiles the details of scriptural institutions and commandments, as well as the biblical ‘mythology.’” See Marcel Simon, *Verus Israel : A Study of the Relations between Christians and Jews in the Roman Empire*, 135-425 (New York: Published for the Littman Library by Oxford University Press, 1986), 150. For a fuller description of this method and its importance to early Christian exegesis see the section below on Origen.


original stock, and the manner in which it established itself in the country which we occupy today.”58 The purpose of his current work, according to Josephus, was to “convict our detractors of malignity and deliberate falsehood, to correct the ignorance of others, and to instruct all who desire to know the truth concerning the antiquity of our race.”59

David Rokeah has argued that the early church saw in the apologetic writings of Hellenistic Judaism an effective means of answering criticism of their own lack of antiquity. He noted that, “The connection of Christianity with the Jewish religion and its sacred writings, whose antiquity no one could question, enabled the Christians to defend themselves against the accusations of novelty and sedition made against them by the pagans.”60 For example, Eusebius acknowledged in his Preparation for the Gospel that Christianity “preferred” the philosophy and religion of the Hebrews, “above all our ancestral traditions.”61 Eusebius demonstrated the reasonableness of this choice, by building a case for the great virtues of the Hebrews and their great antiquity. In doing so, Eusebius excerpted portions from the works of Hellenistic Jewish writers such as Philo, Josephus, Eupolemus, Demetrius, Artapanus, etc.62 In view of these arguments, borrowed by Eusebius from Hellenistic Judaism, he concluded: “Do you not think then that we have with reason preferred these to the Greeks, and accepted the histories of godly men among the Hebrews rather than the gods of Phoenicia and Egypt, and the blasphemous absurdities of those gods?”63 In fact, Eusebius’ emphasis on the attachment of Christianity to the religion of the Hebrews, and its consequent benefit of antiquity was applied specifically to the church in his Ecclesiastical History. Eusebius began his account of church history with the history of Israel, arguing that “In this way…will both the genuine antiquity and the divine majesty of the Christian religion be shown to those who assume that it is recent and foreign, having put in its appearance no earlier than yesterday.”64

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58 Josephus, Against Apion, I.1.
59 Ibid., I.3.
60 Rokeah, Jews, Pagans, and Christians in Conflict, 92.
61 Eusebius, Preparation for the Gospel, 8.1, 298d.
62 See Eusebius’ arguments in Books 7-9 of Preparation for the Gospel.
63 Eusebius, Preparation for the Gospel, 7.4, 303c.
In fact, it was the use of writers such as Philo and Josephus by the church which ultimately resulted in their preservation. As David Runia argued, Philo’s works became so highly respected in the early church that “by the end of the Patristic period he had virtually achieved the status of a Church Father.” Runia also noted that “It is by no means rare that extracts from his works in the Byzantine Catenae are headed with the lemma Fivλωνον ἐπισκόπου, Philo the Bishop.” Likewise, Steve Mason has argued that the “decisive factor” in the survival of Josephus’ works “was the Christian church’s appropriation of the Jewish historian’s writings.”

Scope and Purpose of Study

Judith Lieu has argued that the claims to ownership of these Scriptures— the “much more ours than yours” of Justin Martyr and other early Christian writers—“meant the exclusive right to interpret them, and to find in them anticipation both of present convictions and of the opposing unbelief and disobedience.” Central to these claims was the argument that the church constituted a new Israel, and as such was the true inheritor of the history and traditions of Judaism. However, this drive to claim ownership of the history of Israel was largely driven by the early church’s apologetic need for an “aura of antiquity.” As such, early Christianity faced two competing claims, emphasizing both newness and antiquity for the Christian revelation. These contrasting goals created a fundamental tension that was at the heart of identity formation in early Christianity. And, as John Dawson has argued, “The interpretation of sacred texts is often the principal site of the tension between past and future, the preservation and the refashioning of religious identity.”

Additionally, it is important to note that these claims to ownership extended beyond just the texts and traditions, to specific figures within the history of Israel. As Pierre

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67 Ibid.
70 Rokeah, Jews, Pagans, and Christians in Conflict, 90.
Maraval has argued, Christian writers viewed specific figures from the history of Israel as constituting a “sacred history which belonged to them since it extends into the church.” And, since the Church viewed itself as the true Israel, these figures were claimed by Christian writers as “heroes of its own history….constituting an uninterrupted chain of testimony to the truth.” These claims to ownership, however, were impossible without the “pioneering work of Hellenistic Judaism,” and the writers of early Christianity borrowed heavily from this work in order to establish legitimacy in a Greco-Roman world which valued antiquity.

This thesis will thus investigate the figure of Joseph the patriarch in early Christian interpretation, demonstrating the importance of such figures in articulating a Christian reading of the history of Israel, and the importance of this reading in the identity formation of early Christianity. This thesis will also illumine the debt of this Christian reading of Israel’s history to the work of Hellenistic Judaism. How specifically this Christian history was constructed is the subject of the following pages as the figure of Joseph the patriarch is traced through early Christian interpretation, primarily from the Eastern Church tradition up to the 4th century C.E. The key methodological approach will be an analysis of how the early church employed typological, allegorical, and moral exegesis in its construction of Joseph as a “Christian saint of the Old Testament.” A figure who, to borrow Justin Martyr’s phrase, became in the Christian identity “much more ours than yours.”

Chapter One:
Joseph in the New Testament

The authors of the New Testament were the first to take up this issue of understanding the church’s relationship to the Old Testament Scriptures. References to the figure of

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73 Ibid.
76 This study will focus on writers who offer extended reflections on Joseph. Many of the references to Joseph in this study were located by use of the excellent database *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*. See *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* Cd Rom, University of California, Irvine.
Joseph can be found in Acts 7 and in Hebrews 11.\(^{77}\) The interpretive strategies employed by these writers heavily influence the patristic portrayals of Joseph. Acts 7 recorded a speech by Stephen, traditionally the first Christian martyr, before the Jewish Sanhedrin. Stephen had been arrested on charges of blasphemy, and responded to the high priest’s questioning by giving an overview of Israel’s history. The speech seems to have had two apologetic emphases aimed at criticizing the Jewish people, who had rejected Jesus “the Righteous One.”\(^{78}\) First, Stephen emphasized that God had worked in the past outside of the land of Israel.\(^{79}\) Oscar Cullman saw this as the major point of this speech, which comprised a “salvation history” challenging Israel’s restriction of the presence and work of God in history.\(^{80}\) The second apologetic aim was “the insistence that the Jewish people’s refusal to acknowledge Jesus as Messiah was all of a piece with their attitude to God’s messengers throughout the OT period.”\(^{81}\)

Both of these objectives made Joseph an obvious choice as an exemplar in Stephen’s speech. First, Joseph had been sold into slavery in Egypt by his brothers, and is thus outside of the land of Israel. However, even though alienated from his people and land, “God was with him and rescued him from all of his troubles.”\(^{82}\) Secondly, the brothers sold Joseph into slavery because of their “jealousy.” Stephen assumed that the reader would be familiar with the reasons behind this jealousy, as recorded in Gen 37. Jacob loved Joseph more than Joseph’s brothers, and made a special coat for him to wear, which enraged the brothers. More importantly, Joseph had two dreams, which he told to his brothers. Both of these dreams indicated that one day his brothers would bow down to him as a ruler, and this aroused intense jealousy on the part of the brothers.\(^{83}\) The jealousy of Joseph’s brothers became a standard topos in patristic literature.\(^{84}\) Stephen’s speech contrasted the jealousy of his brothers to Joseph’s magnanimity in inviting his

\(^{77}\) There is an additional text in Revelation 7.8, but it only mentions the “tribe of Joseph” in place of his son Ephraim’s name. This was also commonly done in the Old Testament. See Ps 80.1, 81.5, 78.67.

\(^{78}\) Acts 7.52.


\(^{82}\) Acts 7.9-10.

\(^{83}\) Gen 37.1-11.

\(^{84}\) See 1 Clement 4.9 (discussed later) and Cyprian *Jealousy and Envy* 5.
father “and his whole family” to come to Egypt during a famine. In addition, this negative image of the brothers was further emphasized by the fact that Joseph was rescued from his “troubles” by God, but the brothers’ “great suffering” could only be alleviated by a visit to Joseph. “The Jewish audience is left to conclude: God did not save them from tribulation because he was not with them. The author…has presented a very unique and indeed severely polemical picture of the patriarchs.” This indictment of the “fathers” was later applied, at the end of Stephen’s speech, to his accusers in the Sanhedrin:

You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him.

Joseph was thus counted as one of the prophets persecuted by the jealous fathers. And, though not explicitly stated by Stephen, Joseph and the other persecuted prophets functioned as types of Christ, who also was persecuted and ultimately killed by his brothers. In addition, Stephen’s polemical retelling of the story of Joseph served to denigrate the history of Israel, and along with the remainder of the speech was “a farewell speech to Judaism.” This approach to the history of Israel, as mentioned before, was a means of clearing the way for the identification of the early church as the “new Israel.”

Joseph is also mentioned in the catalogue of great heroes of the faith in Hebrews 11. In Hebrews 11.21 the blessing of Joseph’s two sons by Jacob is mentioned, and then in 11.22 Joseph himself: “By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions about his bones.” The issue of Joseph’s bones and his instructions concerning their care was a common theme in Hellenistic Jewish literature. For instance, in the apocrypha book of Sirach Joseph was praised because his bones received special care: “Nor was anyone ever born like Joseph; even his

86 Acts 7.10. Here Stephen addresses the brothers as “our fathers.”  
87 Acts 7.11.  
88 Richard, 262.  
89 Acts 7.51-52.  
90 Richard, 265.
bones were cared for.” The prominence of this theme was likely linked to Joseph’s anticipation (by faith according to the writer of Hebrews) of the future event of Israel’s exodus from Egypt. Joseph foresaw this and desired that his bones might be returned to the land of his fathers.

Pamela Eisenbaum labeled Hebrews 11 a “Christian reading of Biblical history.” There are several reasons for this idea. First, there is a marked emphasis on heroes of faith who preceded the giving of the Mosaic Law. The only event mentioned in detail after the exodus was the falling of the walls of Jericho, and the only person mentioned in detail was Rahab the harlot. B. F. Westcott in his classic commentary on Hebrews has identified this focus on the pre-history of the Jews as a theme of the letter. He noted that because of the “significant emphasis which the writer lays upon the prae-Judaic form of Revelation….the work of Judaism is made to appear as a stage in the advance towards a wider work which could not be achieved without a preparatory discipline.”

Henry Chadwick noted that the belief in the early church that the Law had been a temporary necessity, initiated a desire to “look back to the patriarchs before Moses who had no Law to keep other than the moral imperative of the inward conscience.” The writer of the letter was then connecting the reader, not to the nation of Israel that arose from these heroes, but to the patriarchs themselves as the source of their history. This approach, in part, anticipated criticisms of Christianity as an “apostasy from Judaism.” Both Jewish and pagan critics of early Christianity questioned Christianity’s non-observance of the law, particularly since Christianity claimed continuity with Judaism as the new Israel. The pagan critic Celsus, questioned Christians on this point by asking

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94 Heb 11.30-31. Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, and Samuel are also listed, but no details are provided, and as Eisenbaum noted some of these characters (Barak, Samson, Jephthah) are dubious selections for a list concerning faith (174-175). Also note they are out of chronological order (Eisenbaum, 174).
96 Chadwick, The Early Church, 67.
97 Wilken, The Christians as the Romans Saw Them, 184.
them, through the voice of an imaginary Jew, “why do you take your origin from our
religion, and then, as if you are progressing in knowledge, despise these things, although
you cannot name any other origin for your doctrine than our law?”98 The approach of the
writer of Hebrew, in emphasizing connections to the patriarchal history, could be used as
an answer to this criticism by later Christian writers.99

Secondly, the lines of identity were also drawn to these heroes by the author noting
that, though these people were praised for their faith, “yet none of them received what
had been promised.” Their lives ended with a sense of incompleteness, which could only
be fulfilled in concert with the readers of Hebrews: “God had planned something better
for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.”100 Thus, this “Christian
reading of Scripture gave what was most likely an ill defined group of people an ancestral
heritage and the undeniable identity that comes with that.”101

It is important to note that in both Acts 7 and Heb 11, lists of heroes are employed to
demonstrate a Christian reading of Israel’s history. In Acts, Jesus’ rejection by the Jews
falls into a line of prophets who had also been persecuted by their own people. Heb 11
emphasized the pre-Mosaic patriarchs, and connected Christians to this group of heroes
by the lines of faith. This use of hero lists to exemplify specific points or virtues was a
common literary form in Hellenistic Jewish literature.102

Chapter Two:

Joseph in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs

The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs is a document with a mixture of Jewish and
early Christian elements forming a collection of final testaments from the twelve sons of
Jacob. The format of the document is that the patriarch is near death, and calls his family
around him to share his reflections on his life with them. H. C. Kee has argued that this
document was written by a Hellenistic Jew, and that it was composed around 250

98 Origen, Contra Celsum, II.4.
99 See the discussion on Chrysostom and Eusebius below.
100 Heb 11.40.
101 Eisenbaum, 226.
102 See Sirach 44-50; 1 Macc 2.51-60; 4 Macc 16.16-23; 4 Macc 18.11-19; 4 Ezra 7.105-111. These
references were noted in Eisenbaum, The Jewish Heroes of Christian History, 230-231.
However, more recent studies have seen it as a “Christian writing incorporating a variety of pre-Christian, Jewish material.” And, Collins has argued that “There is no longer room to doubt that the final text of the Testaments is a Christian document.” As such, the final version of the text is usually dated to around the 2nd century C.E. The main issue in determining dating for this text is the presence of Christian interpolations, with specific messianic prophecies applied to Jesus. For instance, in Testament of Benjamin there is a prophecy concerning a “unique prophet” who:

shall enter the first temple, and there the Lord will be abused and will be raised up on wood, and the spirit of God will move on to all the nations as a fire is poured out. And he shall ascend from Hades and shall pass from earth to heaven. I understand how humble he will be on the earth, and how splendid in heaven.

The presence of these Christian interpolations makes this document particularly relevant for this study. The document shows evidence that a Christian redactor was adding to and incorporating Jewish legends in a Christian recension, attempting to give a Christian reading to these pre-Mosaic patriarchs.

**Joseph as an Ethical Example**

There is much material in this document concerning the figure of Joseph. Throughout the text of the Testaments Joseph is depicted as the ultimate ethical example to be followed by the reader. In the Testament of Simeon Joseph was remembered as “a good man, one who had within him the spirit of God.” Likewise, in the Testament of Benjamin, Joseph was described by his younger brother Benjamin as a moral exemplar.

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105 Collins, Between Athens and Jerusalem : Jewish Identity in the Hellenistic Diaspora, 175.
106 Testament of Benjamin 9.3.
108 Testament of Simeon 4.6, Old Testament Pseudepigrapha.
for his children: “Now, my children, love the Lord God of heaven and earth; keep his commandments; pattern your life after the good and pious man Joseph.”

Joseph was a “good man” in many of the testaments because of the forgiveness he offered his brothers, but more often his goodness is attributed to his ability to withstand the temptation of Potiphar’s wife. This is particularly true in the Testament of Joseph. Joseph is depicted as undergoing severe trials on the part of Potiphar’s wife. Joseph reported that she threatened him with death, sent him to be tortured, and promised him increased power if he would sleep with her. Because of Joseph’s youth, she initially acted as if she desired to be his surrogate mother, but Joseph soon realized that her motherly hugs were meant only “to lure me into a sexual relationship.” Later, she acted as if she desired to be converted to Joseph’s religion with the provision that, “If you want me to abandon the idols, have intercourse with me, and I shall persuade my husband to put away the idols, and we shall live in the presence of your Lord.” Joseph was not convinced of her sincerity, and thus she resorted to threatening to kill her husband, sent Joseph “enchanted food”, and resolved to commit suicide if Joseph did not capitulate. Joseph however remained strong throughout this period of temptation, and ultimately fled from the woman, leaving his cloak behind when she resorted to force to bring him to bed with her.

The Testament of Reuben concurred with this ethical ideal of Joseph. Here, Joseph is contrasted with his brother Reuben, who slept with his father’s handmaiden, Bilhah. Reuben confessed his own lack of control, but reminded his sons who were gathered at his death-bed that “You heard how Joseph protected himself from a woman and purified his mind from all promiscuity: he found favor before God and men.” Reuben went on to describe the extreme measures that Potiphar’s wife took to influence Joseph into sexual intimacy, as she “summoned magicians, and brought potions for him, but his soul’s deliberation rejected evil desire.”

109 Testament of Benjamin 3.1.
111 Ibid., 3.8.
112 Ibid., 4.5.
113 Ibid., 5.1-7.8.
114 Testament of Reuben 4.8.
115 Ibid., 4.9.
The Chastity of Joseph

One aspect of this ethical portrait of Joseph specifically highlighted in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs was his virtue of self-control or chastity. In the Testament of Joseph the writer attributed Joseph’s endurance under temptation to the self-control he derived from a life of ascetic practice. During Joseph’s seven years in the house of Potiphar, he would often fast, and “If my master was absent, I drank no wine; for three day periods I would take no food but give it to the poor and ill. I would awaken early and pray to the Lord, weeping over the Egyptian woman of Memphis because she annoyed me exceedingly and relentlessly.”116 As shown earlier in the Testament of Joseph, the annoyance that Joseph spoke of was no understatement; the woman tried various means to entice him into her bed. One night as the woman relented and left Joseph, again disappointed by his resistance, Joseph noted, “I tell you, my children, it was about the sixth hour when she left me. Bending my knees before the Lord, I prayed for a whole day and night. Toward dawn I arose, crying and begging deliverance from her.”117 It was through this fasting and prayer that Joseph was able to gain the self-control to resist the woman. Later, as Joseph is surrounded by his children at his deathbed, he exhorted them:

So you see, my children, how great are the things that patience and prayer with fasting accomplish. You also, if your pursue self-control and purity with patience and prayer with fasting in humility of heart, the Lord will dwell among you, because he loves self-control. And where the Most High dwells, even if envy befall someone, or slavery, or false accusation, the Lord who dwells with him on account of his self-control not only will rescue him from these evils, but will exalt him and glorify him as he did for me.118

Here Joseph commended the virtue of self-control, attained through the practice of fasting and prayer, as the ultimate source of his blessing, and consequently as the future source of blessing for his descendants. The word used here is the Greek word swfrosuvnh, and is translated variously as “self-control,” “temperance,” and “chastity.” Harm W. Hollander has noted the recurring use of this word in connection with the figure

116 Testament of Joseph 3.4-6.
118 Ibid., 10.1-3.
of Joseph in Hellenistic Jewish Literature. Philo emphasized this quality of swfrosuvnh, in his depiction of Joseph. When Joseph was later thrown in prison by Potiphar, because of the accusations by Potiphar’s wife, Joseph rose to a position of great respect among his fellow prisoners. The reason for this respect, according to Philo, was that, “by setting before them his life of temperance (swfrosuvnh) and every virtue, like an original picture of skilled workmanship, he converted even those who seemed to be quite incurable.”

Josephus also mentioned this quality of self-control within the context of Joseph’s stay in prison. After interpreting the dream of the “butler,” that is, cupbearer, Joseph entreated him to “remember him who predicted thy felicity, and, once at liberty, do not neglect me in the state wherein thou wilt leave me….” Joseph then related the reason for his stay in prison, noting that “it was no crime that brought me into these bonds: nay, it was for virtue’s sake and for sobriety (swfrosuvnh) that I was condemned to undergo a malefactor’s fate.” Josephus also highlighted the role that reason played in Joseph’s resistance to temptation. Throughout the temptation episode in Josephus’ *Jewish Antiquities*, Joseph is depicted as the stoical voice of reason in contrast to the woman’s desire for pleasure. When Potiphar’s wife first approached Joseph, soliciting him to lie with her, Joseph rebuked her and instead of obeying her commands:

> he besought her to govern her passions, representing the hopelessness of satisfying her lust, which would shrink and die when she saw no prospect of gratifying it, while for his part, he would endure anything rather than be obedient to this bequest.

This rebuke served only to heighten the woman’s passion, and she decided to wait for an opportune moment to approach him again. Josephus then recorded that on the occasion of a public festival Potiphar’s wife, pretending to be ill, stayed at home plotting...
to catch Joseph unawares in an empty house.\textsuperscript{124} When Joseph entered the house to attend to his duties, the woman cornered him, threatening him and pleading with him to acquiesce to her desires. Instead, Joseph “recalled to her mind her marriage and wedded life with her husband and besought her to pay more regard to this than the transient pleasure of lust.”\textsuperscript{125} Joseph argued that giving into her lust would only bring remorse, “whereas union with her husband afforded enjoyment without danger, and moreover that perfect confidence before God and man arising from a good conscience.”\textsuperscript{126} Throughout Josephus’ account, Joseph argued with the woman, attempting to “curb the woman’s impulse and to turn her passion into the path of reason.”\textsuperscript{127} Joseph’s adherence to that “path of reason” protected him from falling prey to the woman’s desire.

This theme of adherence to reason was also emphasized in the \textit{Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs}. The \textit{Testament of Reuben} was earlier referred to as depicting the extreme measures that Potiphar’s wife engaged in to force Joseph into submission to her desires. In this testament, Reuben retold to his sons the story of Joseph’s trials as a lesson in how to endure sexual temptation. Joseph’s example was held in contrast to Reuben’s sin of sleeping with his father’s handmaid. The reason for this sin was that Reuben did not obey reason. As a result of seeing his father’s handmaid bathing, Reuben confessed, “For so absorbed were my senses by her naked femininity that I was not able to sleep until I had performed this revolting act.”\textsuperscript{128} Reuben ended his account by reminding his sons that it was Joseph’s adherence to reason that protected him: “For if promiscuity does not triumph over your reason, then neither can Beliar conquer you.”\textsuperscript{129}

Thus to the reader of this testament Reuben was a man given over to his senses leading ultimately to sin, whereas the steadfast Joseph was ruled by the dictates of reason.

This theme can also be traced in the 1\textsuperscript{st} century C.E. book, \textit{Fourth Maccabees}. This Hellenistic Jewish history is a reflection on the primacy of reason over the emotions, and takes as its main examples the apocryphal account of Jewish martyrs under the reign of

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\textsuperscript{124} See Louis Feldman, \textit{Josephus’ Interpretation of the Bible} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 310, note 69, who sees this added element of a public festival as heightening the erotic element of the story. This detail is also mentioned in later rabbinic writings (\textit{Genesis Rabbah} 1.1.1).

\textsuperscript{125} Josephus, \textit{Jewish Antiquities} II.57.

\textsuperscript{126} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{127} Ibid., II.54.

\textsuperscript{128} \textit{Testament of Reuben} 3.12.

\textsuperscript{129} Ibid. 4.11.
the Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes (c. 167-164 B.C.E.). The writer of the book also used figures from Israel’s ancient past to highlight the role of reason. Joseph was depicted in *Fourth Maccabees* as “the temperate Joseph”, who was praised because “through his own rational faculty he gained mastery over his sensuality.” This was no easy task, for Joseph was “a young man at the prime of his sexual desire,” and yet, through his obedience to reason, “he quenched the burning ardor of his passions.”

In summary, Joseph was portrayed in the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* as a moral exemplar, whose virtues of forgiveness, chastity, and reason gave him an honored position among his brothers. The *Testaments* incorporated specific elements of the stories and legends concerning Joseph found in Hellenistic Jewish literature.

### Chapter Three:

**Joseph in the Apostolic Fathers and Early Apologists: Clement, the Epistle of Barnabas, Justin Martyr, and Tertullian**

**Clement**

The book of *First Clement* was written around the end of the 1st century C.E. The author is not named in this letter addressed to the Corinthian church, but tradition has ascribed it to the bishop or presbyter of Rome, Clement (fl. c. 96 C.E.). He wrote to the Corinthian church because of a recent change in their church leadership. Because of strife in the church, some presbyters had been deposed. Clement warned the Corinthians that “It is disgraceful, dear friends…that it should be reported that the well-established and ancient church of the Corinthians, because of one or two persons, is rebelling against its presbyters.” Clement urged the church to reinstate the genuine presbyters. At the

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132 *Fourth Maccabees* 2.4.
133 Harm W. Hollander noted a medieval *Hebrew Testament of Naphtali*, which is similar in content though more elaborate than the *Testament of Naphtali* found in the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*. In this medieval testament there are some negative traditions preserved about Joseph. See Harm W. Hollander, “Joseph in Hellenistic Jewish and Early Christian Literature,” 257-259.
135 *First Clement* 47.6. All quotations for First Clement come from *The Apostolic Fathers*. 
beginning of the letter, Clement offered reasons for the strife in Corinth, and he pointed especially to rampant jealousy and envy. In so doing, Clement provided examples from Scripture that illustrated the danger of jealousy and envy. These exempla lists are similar to those seen in Acts 7 and Heb 11. Rowan Greer has suggested that such lists have their roots in the Jewish synagogue, where “the homiletical use of biblical figures can treat them as models to be followed or cautionary tales to be avoided.”

Clement used Joseph in one example noting, “Jealousy caused Joseph to be persecuted nearly to death, and to be sold into slavery.” Here Clement followed a straightforward interpretation of the Old Testament text, employing the figure of Joseph as nothing more than an illustration. The theme of the brothers’ jealousy of Joseph had been emphasized in Stephen’s speech in Acts 7, and was also emphasized in the writings of Philo and Josephus. Philo noted that “envy, which is ever the enemy of high success, in this case too set to work and created division in a household where every part had been happily flourishing, and stirred up the many brethren against the one.”

In summary, Clement highlighted a key theme in the story of Joseph concerning his relationship with his brothers. Clement, as in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, interpreted this event within an ethical context. Harm W. Hollander has argued that this emphasis on the ethical context of the Joseph story in early Christian literature was influence by Hellenistic Judaism, and “In various situations where moral exhortation is required, including religious services, the example of Joseph is frequently adduced.”

Clement does use typology elsewhere in his letter to interpret Old Testament texts, but he never employs it as his only approach.

The Epistle of Barnabus

The Epistle of Barnabas was written in the 2nd century C.E., possibly in Alexandria, Egypt. It has been described as the “earliest [Christian] writing outside of the New

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137 First Clement 4.9.
138 Philo, On Joseph II.5. See also Josephus, Jewish Antiquities II.1.2.
139 Harm W. Hollander, Joseph in Hellenistic Jewish and Early Christian Literature, 259.
141 See the introduction to the Epistle of Barnabas in The Apostolic Fathers, 160.
Testament which deals at length with ‘Jewish questions’.\textsuperscript{142} There is one mention of Joseph in this epistle, where he is noted in connection with the blessing of his two sons by Jacob. The writer of the epistle begins the account with the comment, “Now let us see whether this people or the former people is the heir, and whether the covenant is for us or for them.”\textsuperscript{143}

The writer was speaking concerning Judaism, and throughout the text he “attempts to show that the covenant of ancient Israel has now become the covenant of the Church.”\textsuperscript{144} The writer began by recalling the story of Rebecca who was told by the Lord that the two children in her womb, Esau and Jacob, were “two nations…and the greater will serve the lesser (Gen 25:21-23).” The writer then elaborated on this theme by describing the blessing of Joseph’s sons. Jacob asked Joseph to bring his two sons Manasseh and Ephraim to him for the blessing. Joseph brought his oldest son Manasseh to Jacob’s right hand- the hand of blessing- because he was the firstborn. “But Jacob saw in the Spirit a symbol of the people to come. And what does he say? ‘And Jacob crossed his hands and placed his right hand on the head of Ephraim, the second and younger, and blessed him’.”\textsuperscript{145} Joseph tried to get Jacob to change his hand to Manasseh, but Jacob replied, “I know my child, I know; but the greater will serve the lesser. Yet this one too shall be blessed.”\textsuperscript{146} The conclusion of the writer of the epistle was that, “Observe how by these means he has ordained that this people should be first, and heir of the covenant.”\textsuperscript{147}

Willis Shotwell has noted that the writer of the \textit{Epistle of Barnabas} was in no way discerning in his use of the Old Testament. “He quotes texts apart from their context, and completely destroys any historical understanding of the Old Testament. All of the Old Testament has a hidden meaning which can be found in Christ and his followers.”\textsuperscript{148}

This theme of the younger child receiving the blessing was a popular interpretive tool in the early church to demonstrate that Christians were the true heirs of the covenant. Irenaeus employed this theme in his \textit{Against Heresies} in dealing with the story of Esau and Jacob. He noted that Esau “looks on the blessing of the firstborn with contempt so

\textsuperscript{142} Wilken, \textit{Judaism and the Early Christian Mind}, 12.
\textsuperscript{143} \textit{Epistle of Barnabas} 13.1. All quotes from the \textit{Epistle of Barnabas} are from \textit{The Apostolic Fathers.}
\textsuperscript{144} Wilken, 13.
\textsuperscript{145} \textit{Epistle of Barnabas} 13.5.
\textsuperscript{146}Ibid. The writer is largely quoting from Gen 48: 14, 18, 19.
\textsuperscript{147} Ibid., 13.6.
\textsuperscript{148}Shotwell, 65.
Jacob receives the blessing, just as younger nation received the blessing when the older said ‘We have no king but Caesar.’” Thus Irenaeus concluded, “the latter people have snatched the blessing of the former from the Father just as Jacob took away the blessing from Esau.” For both of these writers, a common theme of the Old Testament has been interpreted to find its true significance in the replacement of the Jews with the church in the covenant with God.

**Justin Martyr and Tertullian**

Justin Martyr (c.100-c.165 C.E.) was an early Christian apologist who had been converted from Greco-Roman paganism. Justin’s conversion was facilitated by his acceptance of a Christological interpretation of history, which focused on Christ’s fulfillment of the prophecies of the Old Testament. As a result, Justin’s writings demonstrate a marked concern in his writings for a hermeneutic of typology and fulfillment. Justin mentioned Joseph in passing at various points in his works, but did not elaborate much on the figure of Joseph. However, in one section of his *Dialogue with Trypho* Justin gives a typological interpretation of the figure of Joseph in relationship to Moses’ prophecy about him in Deut 33.17. The text from the Septuagint read, “Let him (Joseph) be like the firstling of a bullock; his horns the horns of an unicorn: with these shall he push the nations from one end of the earth to another.” Justin interpreted this passage typologically, noting that the horns of a unicorn represent the type which portrays the cross. For the one beam is placed upright, from which the highest extremity is raised up into a horn, when the other beam is fitted on to it, and the ends appear on both sides as horns joined to the one horn. And the part which is fixed in the center, on which are suspended those who are crucified, also stands out like a horn; and it also looks like a horn conjoined and fixed with the other horns.

Justin works out this elaborate system to emphasize that this strange statement about Joseph is actually pointing toward the cross. In addition, Justin interprets the prophecy of

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150 Ibid.
151 Shotwell, 29.
153 Ibid.
the horns pushing the nations, as “indicative of what is now the fact among all the nations. For some out of all the nations, through the power of this mystery, having been so pushed, that is, pricked in their hearts, have turned from vain idols and demons to serve God.”¹⁵⁵

Tertullian (fl. c.196-c.212 C.E.), the anti-Gnostic writer from North Africa, also mentioned this passage from Deut 33.17, and likewise interpreted it as referring to the cross in his An Answer to the Jews, and again in his work Against Marcion.¹⁵⁶ Tertullian also made reference to Joseph’s being sold by his brothers into Egypt, in An Answer to the Jews. He noted, “Joseph, again, himself was made a figure of Christ in this point alone…that he suffered persecution at the hands of his brethren, and was sold into Egypt on account of the favor of God.”¹⁵⁷ Tertullian then applied this type to Christ noting that likewise, “Christ was sold by Israel- and therefore, ‘according to the flesh,’ by his ‘brethren’- when he is betrayed by Judas.”¹⁵⁸

For both of these writers, Joseph is seen as a type that pointed toward a fuller reality in the person of Christ. Both fall within the tradition of approaching the Old Testament Scriptures with a Christological hermeneutic. The ties for the church to the history of Israel are through the lines of Christ, who fulfills all that is written in the Old Testament. Key to this theme, however, is still the issue of making connections between the history of Israel and the church. Both Justin and Tertullian knew that connecting Christianity to the ancient traditions was a necessary element in defining its content within the Greco-Roman world.

Chapter Four:
Joseph in Origen

Origen (c.185-c.254 C.E.) was, as noted by Gerald Bray, “By any standard of measurement…the greatest biblical scholar of antiquity.”¹⁵⁹ He produced numerous commentaries, collections of sermons, the first piece of textual criticism (the Hexapla),

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.
¹⁵⁶ An Answer to the Jews 10; Against Marcion 3.18.
¹⁵⁹ Gerald Bray, Biblical Interpretation Past & Present, 83.
and many philosophical treatises, including the well-known systematic theology *On the First Things*. Many of Origen’s works have been lost, due to his condemnation for heresy, first at the Council of Alexandria in 400, and then at the Council of Constantinople in 543. Even still, “Origen’s extant works comprise by far the largest body of work by a single author to survive from the first three centuries of the Christian church.”

Origen was the leading proponent of the allegorical method of interpretation of Scripture. Origen viewed the Scriptures, “as a vast ocean, or (using a different image) forest, of mysteries; it was impossible to fathom, or even perceive, them all, but one could be sure that every line, even every word, the sacred authors wrote was replete with meaning.” This meaning was primarily to be understood as pointing to Christ. Origen distinguished a three part approach to interpreting Scripture:

The first sense is the literal one, designed for the non-intellectual mind, but necessary as the basis from which the other senses were to be discerned. The second is the moral one, corresponding to the life of the soul. The third is the spiritual sense, the highest and most important of all…only grasped by revelation.

**Origen’s Homilies on Genesis**

Origen’s sermons provide a wealth of allusions to the figure of Joseph, particularly his sermons dealing with the text of Genesis. Origen interpreted Joseph both as a moral example and also as an allegorical type of Christ.

The only surviving texts of these sermons are the Latin translations by Rufinus. His translations provoked a storm of controversy in antiquity as to their fidelity to Origen’s Greek texts. And, there has been some question of how much the sermons are Rufinus speaking through the character of Origen. However, Ronald Heine has concluded that though Rufinus has made alterations, and the original text can not be reconstructed, still “one may say that, on the whole, the substance can be regarded as representing Origen’s

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163 Bray, 101-102.
thought.”164 Heine agreed with Henry Chadwick’s observation on Rufinus’ translation of Origen’s *Commentary on Romans*: “The voice is the voice of Origen, even though the hands are the hands of Rufinus.”165

In *Genesis Homily* II, Origen preached a message on Noah and the Ark from Gen 6. He developed an allegorical theme for the dimensions of the ark (300 cubits long, 50 wide, 30 high).166 In interpreting the dimensions of width and height, Origen noted that “you will discover many great events to be comprised under the number 30 or 50….Joseph was 30 years old when he was led out of prison and received the rule of all of Egypt.”167 Joseph was led out in order, “that he might divert the calamity of an imminent famine.”168 This was the first mention of Joseph in this grouping of homilies, and provides a glimpse into Origen’s allegorical method. Since all details of Scripture were inspired, then even the mundane dimensions of the ark must have been placed there for spiritual benefit. In this case, Joseph is used as an example of the importance of this number. Origen interprets the number 30’s significance, because 30 is 10 multiplied by three. “But the sum is reduced to one, the number of the total construction, because ‘there is one God the Father from whom are all things, and one Lord…and all things hasten to the one goal of the perfection of God.”169

In *Genesis Homily* XV, Origen exposited Gn 45:25-28. He was intrigued by the contrast in this passage of the phrases “go up” and “go down.” The brothers of Joseph “go up” to bring news of Joseph to Jacob, who then “goes down” to visit Joseph. To Origen going up is a good symbol, while the going down is not, “For if we were to give diligent consideration, we would discover that almost never is anyone related to have gone down to a holy place nor is anyone related to have gone up to a blameworthy place.”170 Origen was alluding to Jacob and his family’s descent into Egypt, but for Origen Egypt symbolized a place of evil desire. Origen noted that the patriarchs tell

164 Origen *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, translated by Ronald Heine, The Fathers of the Church (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1982), 38. All quotes from Origen’s commentary will come from this translation.
165 Ibid., 39.
166 Ibid.
167 Ibid., 83.
168 Ibid.
169 Ibid.
170 *Genesis Homily* XV.1, 203.
Jacob, “Joseph your son is living” (Gen 45.26). But, “these words are not said in the usual sense.”171 This would not have been said of Joseph if he had sinned with Potiphar’s wife, “the soul that sins, the same shall die” (Ezek 18.4).172 Joseph, though living in Egypt away from his people and land, was able to remain pure. Thus Joseph is said to have in Gen 45.26 “dominion over all Egypt.” Why was this an important point to Origen? Origen viewed “dominion over Egypt” as an allegorical symbol meaning “to tread on lust, to flee luxury, and to suppress and curb all the pleasures of the body.”173 Origen identified Egypt in other homilies as a symbol of the pleasures and lusts of the body. For example, he noted in Genesis Homily XVI, that when the Egyptians had sold their land to the Pharaoh, they were allowed to cultivate it, but had to offer a fifth of the produce to Pharaoh.174 Origen contrasted this tithe to that of the people of Israel, who offer a tenth (a tithe) to their priests. Why is there this difference in the numbers? Origen argued, “See the Egyptian people weighing out contributions with the number five; for the five senses in the body are designated, which carnal people serve; for the Egyptians always submit to things visible and corporal.”175

Origen’s allegory of Egypt as the place of bodily desires and pleasure was drawing on a similar allegory in the writings of Philo of Alexandria. Philo noted in The Migration of Abraham that God contemplated in the exodus “taking out all of the population of the soul right away from Egypt, the body, and away from its inhabitants; deeming it a most sore and heavy burden that an understanding endowed with vision should be under the pressure of the pleasures of the flesh.”176 Josephus also portrayed Egypt as a place characterized by evil desire. He labeled the Egyptians as “a voluptuous people and slack to labour, slaves to pleasure in general and to a love of lucre in particular.”177 Interestingly, Philo does shift this view of Egypt as the symbol of bodily pleasure on to Joseph himself. In The Migration of Abraham, Philo, as Origen had earlier done with

171 Ibid., 204.
172 Ibid., XV.2, 205. The translations of the biblical text are from the ones supplied in Origen’s homily.
173 Ibid. XV.3, 206-207.
174 See Gen 47.24.
175 Ibid. XVI.6, 223.
177 Josephus, Jewish Antiquities II.201.
Egypt, associated the number five with Joseph. Joseph is compared to the number five because, “belonging to the five senses with him who hails as friends the body and the things outside the body, him who is usually called Joseph.” 178 Also, Philo calls Joseph in On the Change of Names the “controller of bodily necessaries.” 179 This may, however, have come about because of Joseph’s close association with Egypt.

Origen used this image of Egypt as the place of bodily pleasure to highlight Joseph as a moral example. The strength of Egypt as a place of desire and temptation was implied in Jacob’s excitement over the knowledge that his son has “dominion over Egypt”. 180 It was a wonder to Jacob that Joseph was able to thrive in such a place. Origen thought that it was also important to note that Joseph’s dominion was over all of Egypt, because “If someone who should subject at least some vices of the body, but yield to others and be subject to them, it is not said correctly of him that he holds ‘dominion over the whole land of Egypt.’” 181 This is not the case with Joseph, “whom no bodily lust ruled, was prince and Lord ‘of all Egypt’.” 181 Origen’s point again highlighted the emphasis on Joseph as a virtuous example in both Hellenistic Jewish and early Christian exegesis. Joseph was able to gain control over Egypt, the symbol of bodily desire and temptation, by his chastity and self-control.

Origen’s Exegetical Method

In Origen’s Exodus Homily I, he noted from Ex 1.6-7 that when Joseph and his brothers died that the Israelites “increased in number.” “While Joseph was living it is not reported that the sons of Israel were multiplied nor is anything at all mentioned about increases and multitudes in these times.” 182 Origen focused in on this small point in the text, because “I, believing in the words of my Lord Jesus Christ, do not think that an ‘iota or point’ in the Law and prophets is void of mysteries, nor do I think ‘any of these things can pass away until all things come about’” (Mt 5.18). 183 This was a clear statement of Origen’s sense that everything in Scripture has been placed there for a reason, and

178 Philo The Migration of Abraham XXXVII.203.
179 Philo, On the Change of Names XIV.89.
180 Origen Genesis Homily XV.3, 206.
181 Ibid., 207.
182 Origen Exodus Homily I.4, 231.
183 Ibid.
requires the attention of the interpreter. Origen explained this increase in the number of
the Israelites by shifting into an interpretation which mixes elements of allegory and
typology. He noted that “The sons of Israel were very few before our Joseph died, who
was sold for thirty pieces of silver by Juda one of his brothers.” Origen has shifted the
focus from solely the Genesis narrative, describing the increase of the people at Joseph’s
death, to a focus on another “Joseph”. “But when he tasted death for all, by which ‘he
destroyed him who had the rule of death, that is the devil,’ the people of faith were
multiplied.” Origen then added the testimony of this other “Joseph”, meaning Christ:
“For unless, as he said, ‘a grain of wheat had fallen into the earth and died,’ the Church
would certainly not have produced this huge harvest of the whole earth.”

Origen goes on to apply this allegory within a moral context. He noted, “If, therefore,
Joseph die in you also, that is, if you assume the dying of Christ in your body and you
make your members dead to sin, then ‘the sons of Israel are multiplied in you.” The
“sons of Israel” are then given an allegorical meaning: “The ‘sons of Israel’ are
interpreted as good and spiritual senses. If therefore, the senses of the flesh are put to
death, the senses of the spirit increase, and while the vices are dying in you daily, the
number of virtues is being increased.”

Origen constructed this elaborate moral allegory from Ex 1.6-7 because of the belief
that nothing was placed in Scripture by chance. In addition, he was able to do this,
because the historical dimension of the text was only of secondary importance to him. As
he noted later in the same homily, “These words are not written to instruct us in history,
nor must we think that the divine books narrate the acts of the Egyptians. What has been
written ‘has been written for our instruction and admonition.’ Origen was using as a
base for his allegorization of this text about Joseph and his brothers’ deaths, the argument
of Paul in 1 Cor 10. Here Paul gives a brief synopsis of Israel’s history during the exodus
and the years of wandering in the desert. Similarly to Origen, Paul’s reflection on these
events was that “These things happened to them as examples and were written down as

\[\text{\textsuperscript{184} Ibid., 232.} \]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{185} Ibid.} \]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{186} Ibid.} \]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{187} Ibid.} \]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{188} Ibid.} \]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{189} Origen Exod. Homily 1.5, 234.} \]
warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come.” 190 For Paul, there was still a historical element in the event “these things happened to them.” Yet their ultimate meaning is that they are instructive as moral examples to the Christian reader of Paul’s letter. And, the reason that Paul was able to connect these historical events in Israel’s past to his readers was that in the church, “the fulfillment of the ages has come.”

Origen builds further on this argument of Paul, in his interpretation of Romans 4. Origen noted in reference to Romans 4.3 “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” that “the Apostle says that these things were written, not for Abraham’s sake alone but also for ours…Indeed is not everything which is said about him said not for his sake alone but also for us?” 191 Origen further applied this principle noting, “It is similar for what is written about Jacob and the other patriarchs. For what reason could there seem to be that what was indeed written about Abraham could be said to pertain to us, but, although similar in form, not what was said about Isaac and Jacob and Judah and Joseph and the others?” 192 Origen was arguing that the chain of interpretation was linked from Abraham to Joseph, and thus “it will be logical that, concerning everything that has been written, not only for the sake of those who were living at the time but also for our sake, they have been written.” 193 Thus, for Origen “what had happened was important because of its bearing upon the present. The meaning of history and not history as such found pride of place.” 194

In one sense, this method of interpretation was drawn from Paul’s own conclusions concerning the history of Israel. However, for Origen the more direct influence was likely Philo’s interpretive method. Philo noted in The Confusion of Tongues that a straightforward reading of a text focusing on the letters was insufficient to ascertain the true meaning. Philo argued that, “the letter is to the oracle but as the shadow to the substance.” 195 To press on to the “higher values,” the reader must employ an allegorical interpretation to the text. Philo’s allegorical method, according to Marcel Simon, “consisted in a search beneath the letter of scripture for an expression of transcendent

190 1 Cor 10.11.
192 Ibid.
193 Ibid.
194 Kugel and Greer, Early Biblical Interpretation, 201.
Origen argued in his apologetic work *Contra Celsum* that Christian and Jewish interpretation were fundamentally different: “we both confess that the books were written by divine inspiration, but concerning the interpretation of the contents of the books we no longer speak alike.” Origen added that differences in interpretation centered around the fact, “that we think the literal interpretation of the laws does not contain the meaning of the legislation.” This argument, however, overlooked the fact that Origen’s allegorical method was modeled on the exegesis of Philo. Origen was, similarly to Philo, concerned with pushing the readers beyond the letter of the text into the experience of its transcendent truths, thus Origin’s interpretation “moves from the letter of the narrative meaning to the spirit of the allegorical meaning mysteriously embodied in the text.” Of course, for Origen this allegorization was meant to elicit a distinctively Christian reading of the Scriptures. Still, Origen was concerned with emphasizing the connection of the Scriptures to the present context of the reader, and as such the allegorical method in early Christian interpretation continued the distinctive concerns of Hellenistic Judaism. And, as Simon argued “With respect both to the principles and to some of the results a clear line of development is traceable from one to the other.”

Chapter Five:
Joseph in the Syriac Sources up to the 4th Century C.E.

The Syriac Church reflected a tradition of interpretation centered on the use of the Semitic language of Syriac as its primary language of discourse. Syrian Christianity had a very long tradition of close association with Judaism in both its founding myth and in its on-going dialogue with the strong Jewish communities of Syria. As such, the two

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197 Origen, *Contra Celsum*, V.60.
198 Ibid.
writers examined in this study, Aphrahat and Ephrem, offer good insight into Early Christian interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures.

**Joseph in Aphrahat the Persian Sage**

There are few biographical details available for Aphrahat (fl. 337-345). Other than knowing that he wrote in Syriac and was identified in later Syriac traditions as the “Persian Sage,” the only available information is what can be deduced from his one extant work, *Demonstrations*. The *Demonstrations* is a series of twenty-three letters arranged by topics that summarize the Christian faith. These letters were written around 345 C.E.  

Aphrahat addressed these to the “children of the Church of God.” Aphrahat stated that he wrote the *Demonstrations* to these children of the Church in order that,

> when these come into their hands in various places, and when they read in them, they may also remember my insignificance in their prayers, and may know that I am a sinner also, and fail short; but that this is my faith, that I have set forth from the beginning and written, in these chapters written (by me).

From the few autobiographical remarks in the text of the *Demonstrations* it can be said that, “He was an ascetic, evidently holding some important ecclesiastical office, and lived through the persecution of the Sasanid king, Shapur II.”

Though *Demonstrations* is a short text, Aphrahat provided many examples of how he interpreted the Old Testament scriptures. Aphrahat used characters from the Hebrew scriptures as examples for his summary of the faith, and, of particular interest to this study, he mentioned Joseph the patriarch in several sections of his letters. In *Demonstration* I, Aphrahat addressed the topic of faith. He drew on several examples from Israel’s history to demonstrate the necessity of faith, and the blessings for those who possess it. He used Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He then listed

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204 Ibid.
Joseph as an example, noting “Joseph, because of his faith, was tried in the waters of contention, and was delivered from his trial, and his Lord established a witness in him, as David said:—Witness hath he established in Joseph.” Aphrahat did not point out a specific event here, but sees rather Joseph’s whole life as an example of one who, because of faith, is able to endure trials. Aphrahat’s list included examples from Israel’s history culminating in the life of Christ. Aphrahat’s stated purpose in using these examples, including Joseph, was:

> when thou hast read and learned the works of faith, thou mayest be made like unto that tilled land upon which the good seed fell, and produced fruit a hundred-fold and sixty-fold and thirty-fold. And when thou comest to thy Lord, He may call thee a good servant and prudent and faithful, who on account of His faith, that abounded, is to enter into the Kingdom of his Lord.

Joseph then, as well as the other characters used by Aphrahat, is a witness, or exemplar to be followed in the reader’s own pursuit of faith.

Aphrahat repeatedly engaged in this type of moral exposition using Joseph and others as exemplars for his readers. In *Demonstration V*, Aphrahat discussed a common theme observed in scripture: characters who exalt themselves are eventually humbled. Aphrahat gave the example of Cain and Abel, the Sodomites and Lot, Esau and Jacob, but also the sons of Jacob in their dealings with Joseph. Aphrahat noted “And the children of Jacob gloried over Joseph, and (afterwards) fell down and worshipped him in Egypt.” Likewise, in *Demonstration VI*, addressed to monks, Joseph’s temptation by Potiphar’s wife was used as an example to warn monks that Satan often entices to sin through the medium of a woman. Aphrahat first noted that Adam was tempted through Eve, and then added “And again he came in against Joseph through his master's wife, but Joseph was acquainted with his craftiness and would not afford him a hearing.”

Aphrahat also used Joseph as an example to pastors in *Demonstration X*. Aphrahat described the vocation of a pastor, noting “Pastors are set over the flock, and give the sheep the food of life. Whosoever is watchful, and toils in behalf of his sheep, is careful

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206 Aphrahat, *Demonstrations* I.14. The reference attributed to David is from Ps 81.5.
207 Ibid., I.20.
208 Note the similarities of this list of pre-Mosaic heroes of faith to that of Hebrews 11, although the list in Hebrews curiously emphasized the instructions given by Joseph for the care of his bones as evidence of his faith. See the discussion below concerning the importance of the theme of the care of Joseph’s bones.
209 Ibid., V.3.
210 Ibid., VI.3.
for his flock, and is the disciple of our Good Shepherd, who gave Himself in behalf of His sheep." Aphrahat drew on the imagery of the shepherd to illustrate what a pastor is called to do within the church. He recalls how many of the characters from Israel’s history were shepherds, including Jacob, Joseph and his brothers, Moses, David, and Amos. Aphrahat then proposed the question, “Now, why, my beloved, did these pastors first feed the sheep, and were then chosen to be pastors of men?” The answer for Aphrahat was that being a shepherd prepares one to become a pastor: “Clearly that they might learn how a pastor cares for his sheep, and is watchful and toils in behalf of his sheep. And when they had learned the manners of pastors, they were chosen for the pastoral office.” Aphrahat used Joseph as one example of the vocation of shepherding as preparation for pastoring. He observed, “Joseph used to tend the sheep along with his brethren; and in Egypt he became guide to a numerous people, and led them back, as a good pastor does his flock.” Aphrahat similarly observed later in his address, “Thus Joseph was chosen from the sheep, to guide the Egyptians in the time of affliction.”

A similar observation concerning Joseph was made by Philo in his treatise On Joseph. Philo noted Joseph was trained for his position as a statesman in Egypt from the time of his youth. “This training was first given to him at about the age of seventeen by the lore of the shepherd’s craft, which corresponds closely to the lore of statesmanship.” Philo argued success in shepherding will prepare one for future success as a king,

since through the charge of flocks which deserve less thought and care he has been taught the charge of the noblest flock of living creatures—mankind…so to those who hope to superintend a state nothing is so suitable as shepherding, which gives practice in the exercise of authority and generalship.

One of Aphrahat’s longest reference to Joseph is found in his account of Joseph’s death and the burial of his bones. The reference comes from Demonstration VIII in which Aphrahat dealt with the topic of the resurrection. Aphrahat began the discussion by noting the hope that the patriarchs had in a future resurrection. In particular, he

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211 Ibid., X.1.
212 Ibid., X.2.
213 Ibid.
214 Ibid.
215 Ibid., X.5.
217 Ibid., I.2-3.
mentioned Jacob who made Joseph swear an oath that he would not bury him in Egypt, but return him to the land of his fathers. Aphrahat then posed the question, “And why, my beloved, did Jacob not wish to be buried in Egypt, but with his fathers?” The answer given by Aphrahat is that Jacob was looking ahead to the day of the resurrection when, “he might rise up near to his fathers, and might not at the time of the Resurrection be mingled with the wicked who shall return to Sheol and to punishment.” This explanatory note offered by Aphrahat, closely resembles a similar discussion in the Midrashic literature. The rabbis dealt in a similar way with the request of Jacob to Joseph that he be buried in the land of his ancestors. The questions was posed, “Why were all the Patriarchs so anxious and so desirous for burial in Eretz Israel?” One of the answers offered was “Because the dead of Eretz Israel will be the first to be resurrected in the days of the Messiah and to enjoy the years of the Messiah.” Both Aphrahat and the rabbis of Genesis Rabbah place this issue within the context of the resurrection.

Aphrahat then went on to discuss the oath that Joseph had his brothers make, that when the sons and daughters of Israel left the land of Egypt they should take his bones with them to be buried in the land of Joseph’s fathers. Aphrahat noted that when the time came for Israel to leave Egypt, Moses remembered to obtain the bones of Joseph and take them with the Israelites in their exodus. The reason for this, according to Aphrahat was that to Moses, “the bones of the righteous man were more precious and better in his estimation than the gold and the silver that the children of Israel took from Egypt when they spoiled them.” Aphrahat was here contrasting the reference in Ex 12.35-37, where the Israelites plundered the gold and silver of the Egyptians to Moses’ remembrance of the bones of Joseph. Aphrahat recognized some special worth for

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218 Ibid., VIII.7.
219 Ibid.
221 Ibid. It is interesting to note that a concern is then raised for the righteous who were not able to be buried in Eretz Israel. This problem is resolved by the observation that God “makes cavities like channels for them in the earth, and they roll along in them until they reach Eretz Israel, when the Holy One, blessed be He, will infuse into them a spirit of life and they will arise.”
222 Ex 13.19
223 Aphrahat, Demonstrations VIII.8.
Joseph’s bones, and this worth was also recognized by Ephrem in his *Commentary on Exodus*. Ephrem noted that “The people took the spoils from the Egyptians, and Moses took the bones of Joseph.” In addition, their worth was recognized in the Midrashic and Talmudic literature, where an extensive corpus of legends and traditions arose concerning the care of Joseph’s bones. James Kugel has argued that these legends proliferated because of the repeated references to the care of Joseph’s bones in the Biblical text: Joseph himself gave instructions concerning his bones in Gen 50.24-26; Moses was reported as remembering to collect Joseph’s bones before leaving Egypt in Ex 13.19; and the book of Joshua recorded the burial of Joseph’s bones in the promised land at Shechem (Josh 24.32).

This theme of the importance of Joseph’s bones was also reflected in Hellenistic Jewish literature. The apocryphal book of Sirach closed its reflection on wisdom with a hymn which listed “praises of famous men, our ancestors in their generations.” Included in this list of famous men was Joseph, of whom the writer noted “Nor was anyone ever born like Joseph; even his bones were cared for.” Though the focus in both Sirach and in Heb 11 on Joseph’s bones being a source of his renown is curious, even more peculiar is the reference in the *Testament of Simeon* of the magical qualities attached to Joseph’s bones. Here the children of Simeon are reported as having carried his bones to be buried at the traditional burial site of Hebron in Palestine. However, the writer noted: “The bones of Joseph the Egyptians kept in the tombs of the kings, since their wizards told them that at the departure of Joseph’s bones there would be darkness...”

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226 Kugel, 128-129.


228 Sirach 49.15.
and gloom in the whole land and a great plague on the Egyptians, so that even with a lamp no one could recognize his brother.”

Aphrahat’s account next moved to the transfer of the bones from Moses, to Joshua, and then to burial in the land of promise. Aphrahat noted that Joseph’s bones accompanied Moses and the people during the forty years of wandering in the wilderness. When Moses died he passed the bones on to Joshua as his inheritance. Joshua treasured this gift, because “The bones of Joseph his father were better in his estimation than all the spoil of that land which he subdued.” Aphrahat then asked why Joshua received the bones of Joseph. The answer was, “Clearly, because he was of the tribe of Ephraim the son of Joseph.” Joshua took the bones, and “buried them in the land of promise, that there might be in that land a treasure, (even) that of the bones of Joseph (that were) buried therein.”

Again, Aphrahat placed here a special value on these old bones of Joseph that reflecting similar traditions in Jewish interpretations. Ephrem described in more detail this honored burial of Joseph’s bones in Hymn 19 of his Hymns on Virginity:

Joshua Bar Nun gathered a congregation,
and came carrying Joseph with great pomp;
he placed him in you. From his bones
wafted the smell of his victory.
A desirable blossom and a triumphant flower
struggled with fire and extinguished it.
Who has even seen a blossom that surrounded itself with its glory?

Aphrahat also interpreted Joseph as a type prefiguring Christ. In Demonstration XXI, Aphrahat addressed the issue of persecution. Here he noted, “Joseph who was persecuted was a type of the persecuted Jesus.” Aphrahat then detailed events in the life of Joseph, observing there hints and foreshadowings of similar events in the life of Christ. Aphrahat compared Joseph being clothed by his father in a coat of many colors to Jesus being clothed by God in human flesh. Joseph’s brothers threw him into a pit, as Jesus’ brothers (the Jews) threw him into the grave. Joseph rose from the pit, and

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229 Testament of Simeon 8.3.
230 Aphrahat, Demonstrations VIII.8.
231 Ibid.
232 Ibid.
234 Aphrahat, Demonstrations XXI.9.
likewise Jesus rose from the dead. When Joseph revealed himself to his brothers, they were afraid of him, and when Jesus returns his brothers will be afraid because they crucified him. Joseph was sold into Egypt on the counsel of Judah, and Jesus was sold by Judas Iscariot to the Jews. Joseph left behind two garments, one to his brothers (the coat of many colors) and one in the hands of Potiphar’s wife, likewise Jesus left behind his clothes, which were divided by the soldiers. Joseph gave bread to the whole world during his administration in Egypt, and Jesus supplied to the whole world the bread of life. Joseph married the daughter of an unclean priest in Egypt, and Jesus took for his bride the church, composed of the unclean Gentiles.\textsuperscript{235} There is a similar list of typologies of Joseph and Christ in the later sermon attributed to Ephrem, \textit{Sermon on Joseph the Most Virtuous}.

In summary, Aphrahat interpreted Joseph as a moral exemplar and as a type whose life prefigured that of Christ. Aphrahat also showed familiarity with and use of Rabbinic and Hellenistic Jewish traditions and legends in his interpretation of the figure of Joseph.

\textbf{Joseph in Ephrem the Syrian}

As for Aphrahat, so also for Ephrem (c.306-373), the biographical details provided are very few. There are a number of late sources which give more details, however many of these incorporate legendary materials and are questionable as primary sources.\textsuperscript{236} It is known that Ephrem was born in Nisibis, a city in northeastern Mesopotamia probably to Christian parents. He lived most of his life in Nisibis, but in 363 upon the death of Julian the Apostate, Nisibis was given by Jovinian to the Sassanid empire. This event brought about a mass exodus of Christians from the city, some of which, like Ephrem, ended up in Edessa to the west. He stayed in Edessa for the remaining ten years of his life, where he was ordained into the diaconate and assisted in the relief of a famine in the city.\textsuperscript{237}

For Ephrem the commentaries he wrote were a secondary means for his exegesis of the scriptures. His primary means for the teaching of scripture was through his poetical

\textsuperscript{235} Ibid., 21.9. This is only a selection of some of the types that Aphrahat finds in the story of Joseph.
\textsuperscript{236} See Sebastian Brock, \textit{The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem} (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1992), 16.
\textsuperscript{237} See, McVey, 28.
expositions. Ephrem noted at the beginning of his Commentary on Genesis that “I had not wanted to write a commentary on the first book of Creation, lest we should now repeat, what we had set down in the metrical homilies and hymns.” However, in spite of this hesitancy to write commentaries, there was in the Syriac and Greek churches the tradition that Ephrem produced commentaries on all the books of the Bible. “Many of these commentaries survive in Armenian translation; there are also partial versions that survive in Syriac in fragments preserved in later Syriac commentaries and catenae.”

The immensity of this literary output was likely due to his position as “Interpreter” of the School of Nisibis. He was appointed to this position under the leadership of Jacob of Nisibis (bishop of Nisibis in the early 4th century) and continued to serve under the bishoprics of Babu, Vologeses, and Abraham. His duties would have involved instruction in the church as its “chief biblical exegete” and service as “master of the city’s school of religious education.” Thus, for Ephrem, many of his duties in service to the church in Nisibis and later in Edessa revolved around the exegesis and instruction of the biblical text.

One legend concerning Ephrem recorded by the Syriac translator of Palladius’ Lausiac History mirrors this life-long vocation of interpreting scripture. The translator records a dream of one of the “holy fathers” who sees a band of angels in which one of the angels is carrying a scroll. The angels were asking one another who could be entrusted with the scroll. After some discussion the angels agreed:

‘No one can be entrusted with this apart from Ephrem.’ Whereupon they gave it to him. When the father arose in the morning he heard people saying, ‘Ephrem teaches as if a fountain was flowing from his mouth.’ Then the elder who had seen the dream recognized that what issued from his lips was from the Holy Spirit.

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240 Ibid., 42.
It is perhaps with this sense of duty that Ephrem, though recording his hesitations about the commentary, went on to note in the introduction to his commentary on Genesis that “Nevertheless, compelled by the love of friends, we have written briefly of those things of which we wrote at length in the metrical homilies and in the hymns.”

Sidney H. Griffith has highlighted the idea expressed here by Ephrem of the briefness of his commentary literature in comparison to the homilies and hymns, noting that Ephrem “seems to be in a hurry, as if the commentaries are meant to serve only some immediate, academic purpose.”

Edward G. Mathews agreed with Griffith noting that in the commentaries, Ephrem “does not deal with the texts in such depth, or in the same ways, as he did in his hymns….Most of the Commentary is a close literal reading of the text.”

However, in spite of its brevity, Ephrem’s Commentary on Genesis has an extended reflection on the figure of Joseph the patriarch which offers more than just a “literal reading” of the biblical text. Ephrem expounded directly from the text in Genesis, but adds material in his commentary that often can only be found in Jewish extra-canonical traditions. Though in addition to his commentary there is a sermon on Joseph attributed to Ephrem, this is from the corpus of Greek works attributed to him and may be a later work that emerged from his disciples.

Joseph also appears sporadically in some of Ephrem’s hymns, but the Commentary on Genesis offers the most detailed look at his interpretive approach to the Joseph narrative. This portion of the thesis will study Ephrem’s interpretation of Joseph up to his exaltation by pharaoh to a position of power in Egypt.

Ephrem began his exposition on Joseph by noting the incident recorded in the Genesis narrative of Joseph shepherding with his brothers, and returning to his father with a bad

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244 Ephrem Commentary on Genesis, Prologue.1
247 This sermon will be used in several points as a means of showing the continuity of some of Ephrem’s interpretive strategies. All quotes from this sermon will be taken from Sermon on Joseph the Most Virtuous, translated by Archimandrite Ephrem; available from http://www.anastasis.org.uk/on_joseph.htm; Internet. This is the home page of the Monastery of St. Andrew, the First Called in Manchester, England. It is a fine internet site with several hard to find texts. Archimandrite Ephrem lives and works at the monastery.
248 See especially Ephrem Hymns on Virginity, Hymn 18, 19, 21.
report of his brothers. Ephrem clarified in his text that the brothers Joseph was shepherding with were “the sons of his father’s concubines.” The text of Genesis calls them the “the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father’s wives.” Ephrem added to this a reflective comment that is not in the book of Genesis, noting “Because Joseph had exposed them in their deed they hated him.” These changes are minor, but possibly show even from the outset of Ephrem’s handling of the Joseph narrative reliance on more than just the canonical text.

Ephrem seems to be drawing on a tradition in Jewish interpretation of a special enmity existing between the sons of Jacob’s concubines and Joseph. In the Testament of Gad, one of the sections of the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs, the character of Gad, one of the sons of Zilpah, reported to his sons that Joseph had been shepherding with him for thirty days. When Joseph returned to his father he gave a negative report to him that “the sons of Zilpah and Bilhah are killing the best animals and eating them against the advice of Judah and Reuben.” Gad explained to his children that Joseph had lied or misunderstood the situation, because “He saw that I had set free a lamb from the mouth of the bear, which I then killed, but that I had killed the lamb when I was saddened to see that it was too weak to live; and we had eaten it.” As a result of Joseph’s negative report, Gad confesses “On this matter I bore a grudge against Joseph until the day he was sold into Egypt; the spirit of hatred was in me, and I wanted to see or hear nothing of Joseph….I now confess my sin, children, that frequently I wanted to kill him.”

A similar tradition is recorded in the Hellenistic Jewish romance Joseph and Aseneth. Joseph inspired jealousy in Pharaoh’s son by his marriage to Aseneth. He had long desired her for his own, and hatched a plot to kill Joseph and take Aseneth to be his bride. Pharaoh’s son proposed his plan to Joseph’s brothers, Simeon and Levi, but they refused to have a part in it. He then approached the sons of the concubines telling them Joseph had planned to kill them off after Jacob died. The sons of Bilhah and Zilpah joined

249 Gen 37.2. Though Gen 29.24 recognized Zilpah as the maidservant of Leah, and Gen 29.29 labeled Bilhah as the maidservant of Rachel.
250 Ephrem Commentary on Genesis XXXIII.1.
251 Gen 37.2.
252 Ephrem Commentary on Genesis XXXIII.1.
253 Testament of Gad 1.6.
254 Ibid. 1.7.
255 Ibid. 1.8-2.1.
Pharaoh’s son in this plot against Joseph— a plot that ultimately led to the death of Pharaoh’s son and the defeat of the sons of the concubines.\textsuperscript{256} Though Ephrem’s reference to this enmity between Joseph and the sons of the concubines was much briefer, it does illustrate his familiarity with expansions on the Joseph story also found in Hellenistic Jewish literature.

Ephrem next gave a summarized account of Joseph’s dreams, the first concerning the sheaves and the second concerning the sun, moon, and eleven stars. Ephrem focused in on the second dream where Joseph envisions the sun, moon, and the eleven stars bowing down to him.\textsuperscript{257} This was to be symbolic of his father, mother, and eleven brothers bowing to him. Joseph’s brothers, in Ephrem’s account, mock this dream because Joseph’s mother, Rachel, is already dead so she would not be able to bow down to him.\textsuperscript{258} Ephrem provided an answer to this dilemma, noting that “Because it is said, ‘A man and his wife are one flesh,’ Jacob, symbolized by the sun, bowed down on the head of his staff, and with him Rachel, symbolized by the moon, bowed down, although she did not [in fact] bow down.”\textsuperscript{259}

Ephrem’s explanatory note on the dream is very similar to the exegetical notes provided by the rabbis in the midrashic literature, which often engages in resolving dilemmas created by the biblical text. This same exegetical problem of Joseph’s dream is addressed in \textit{Genesis Rabbah}. The rabbis address the problem of Jacob’s questioning of the dream, assuming that Jacob’s issue is similar to the issue recorded by Ephrem, concerning the problem of the death of Rachel. The rabbis of the \textit{Genesis Rabbah} resolve the problem in two ways. First, “R. Levi said in the name of R. Hama b. R. Hanina: Jacob thought that resurrection would take place in his days.”\textsuperscript{260} Here the rabbis interpret Jacob’s response as an affirmation of the dream rather than a rebuke to Joseph. He can affirm the dream of Joseph because he believed that Rachel would be resurrected and thus could bow down with Jacob and the eleven brothers. Another resolution of this issue offered by the rabbis was that Jacob misunderstood the application of the dream.


\textsuperscript{257} Gen 37.9.

\textsuperscript{258} In the Genesis account it is actually Jacob who questioned the reality of Joseph’ dream (Gen 37.10).

\textsuperscript{259} Ephrem \textit{Commentary on Genesis} XXXIII.1.2.

\textsuperscript{260} \textit{Genesis Rabbah} LXXXIV.11.
Genesis Rabbah recorded “But our ancestor did not know that it applied to Bilhah, Rachel’s handmaid, who had brought him [Joseph] up like a mother.” Ephrem’s resolution of the conflict is similar in form to the rabbis in its careful attention to the difficulties presented by the text.

Ephrem gave a brief summary of the capture and sale of Joseph by his brothers, adding little additional material. However, he did highlight the duplicity of the brothers in their treatment of Joseph and their actions before their father. The Genesis account recorded only that when Jacob was mourning “All his sons and daughters came forth to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted.” Ephrem made explicit this deception noting:

With no mercy they cast him into a pit in the desert but they wept over him with tears in the house. They sold him naked to the Arabs but wept over him and wailed in the presence of the Canaanites. They put irons on his hands and feet and sent him on his way but composed lamentations over him in the village.

Ginzberg recorded a similar tradition in the Jewish legends of the sons mourning with Jacob in Yashar Wa Yesheb, but their mourning is connected to their sorrow over the grief they had caused their father.

The account of Joseph’s sale into Egypt and his temptation by Potiphar’s wife in Ephrem’s commentary stayed very close to the text of Genesis. Though this episode and in particular Joseph’s dealings with Potiphar’s wife received much comment and expansion in Jewish exegesis, Ephrem only gave cursory remarks on the topic. Ephrem’s silence on this episode may ironically be due to his close reading of the expansions by Jewish commentators, particularly in the Midrashic literature. The commentary of the rabbis on Joseph’s behavior with Potiphar’s wife, at times depicts

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261 Ibid.
262 Gen 37.35.
263 Ephrem Commentary on Genesis XXXIII.2.
264 Ginzberg, 27. The reference is provided in vol. 5, page 331, note 64. Note additionally the mourning of the sons of Jacob in The Ethiopic History of Joseph, translated by E. Isaac in Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha 6 (1990): 3-125. Here after twenty years of mourning Jacob becomes very ill. The sons saw this and cried out, “Woe unto us when the Lord, the Most High, shames us on account of what we have done to our father, and he [Jacob?] curses! Woe unto us from his curse and the tears of his eyes!”
265 Gen 39.
266 However, in the Sermon on Joseph the Most Virtuous there is a lengthy temptation scene. It includes Potiphar’s wife dressing lavishly to entice the young Joseph, and a threat by her to poison her husband in order to make way for Joseph. The entire account is very similar to the temptation scene in the Testament of Joseph 3-9.5.
Joseph in a negative, even scatological fashion. Joseph was accused of being partially responsible for the lust of Potiphar’s wife, because of the excessive attention to his appearance. Thus, he was compared to a man who, “sat in the street, penciling his eyes, curling his hair and lifting his heel, while he exclaimed, ‘I am indeed a man.’” 267 The temptation of Joseph was also attributed to his self-satisfaction with the life of ease he attained in Potiphar’s house. The rabbis noted that as a result of this, “Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to him: ‘Empty words! By thy life, I will incite the she-bear against thee.’” 268 Also, the temptation came because Joseph complained about not being tested by God as his fathers had: “My father was tried, and my grandfather was tried, but I am not put to the test, [Joseph thought to himself]. Said God to him: ‘By thy life! I will try thee even more than them.’” 269

The rabbis depicted Joseph as escaping from the temptation of Potiphar’s wife, but they suggested that Joseph struggled before making the virtuous decision to flee. Joseph was accused of entering the empty house of Potiphar with the intention of having sex with Potiphar’s wife. Joseph was kept from fornication, according to R. Samuel b. Nahman, because of impotence: “on examination he did not find himself a man.” 270 R. Isaac, however, argued that fornication was avoided by Joseph’s premature ejaculation, thus “His seed was scattered and issued through his finger-nails.” 271 R. Huna disagreed with both of these accounts, arguing instead that Joseph’s arousal was averted by a vision of his father’s face, “at which his blood cooled.” 272 These comments reflect a need on the part of the rabbis of the Midrashim to make sense out of Joseph’s later being thrown into prison. For the rabbis “nothing happens without divine providence. Therefore, when Joseph is later punished by Potiphar, it would not make theological sense if Joseph were innocent.” 273

Though Ephrem avoided the more suggestive elements of this story, he did add one interesting detail concerning Joseph’s fleeing from Potiphar’s wife. In a tradition that

267 *Genesis Rabbah* LXXXVII.3.
268 Ibid., LXXXVII.4.
269 Ibid.
270 Ibid., LXXXVII.7.
271 Ibid.
272 Ibid. Each of the above reasons for Joseph avoiding fornication, are derived by the rabbis from the text of Jacob’s blessing of Joseph in Gen 49.22-26.
does not seem to be attested elsewhere, Ephrem noted “But Joseph, who could have fled and, by doing so, have gone to his father’s house, detested this flight which would have spared him from shame. He rather persevered until he saw how the dreams that he had seen would turn out.” Ephrem here depicted Joseph as having more control and insight into his destiny than the Genesis text gave him.

Ephrem also summarized Joseph’s time spent in prison, giving only passing mention to his rise to leadership and his interpretation of the dreams of the butler and baker. Ephrem did note concerning Joseph’s request that the butler remember him when he was restored to his position, “that ‘remember me’ that Joseph had told him made him forget for two years.” This reflection by Ephrem carried a sense of negativity. Joseph’s request worked the opposite result, causing him to remain in prison for an additional period of two years. The Sermon on Joseph attributed to Ephrem also recorded this negative view of Joseph’s request of the butler. The writer questions Joseph for seeking the help of the butler:

Abandoning God, you appeal to a human! And yet you experienced God’s help in the greatest need, when you preserved the tunic of your chastity untouched! Why are you faint-hearted, blessed one? God foresees kingship and glory for you whenever he wills. When you nobly endure the test, you make the garlands of victory brighter!

The writer went on to note that the butler forgot about Joseph, “in accordance with God’s providence.”

The rabbis of the Genesis Rabbah likewise found in this act of forgetfulness a purpose larger than just the butler’s poor memory. One interpretation proposed that God sent an angel to force the butler into forgetfulness, until God was ready to bring Joseph out of prison. The Genesis Rabbah recorded of the butler that “He kept on making resolutions the whole of that day, but an angel would come and upset him; he kept on making knots,

274 Ephrem Commentary on Genesis XXXV.2.
275 Note that this concern does arise in other Jewish traditions in the sense that there were questions of why Joseph did not return to his father, or why he did not send for him at an earlier stage. See for instance the reference in Demetrius Fragment Two 13. Here Joseph’s success in Egypt is reported, but it is noted that he did not send for his father, because he was a shepherd and Egyptians abhorred shepherds.
276 Gen 40.
277 Ibid. XXXV.3.
278 Sermon on Joseph the Most Virtuous lines 595-600.
279 Ibid., line 606.
but an angel would come and untie them.” 280 In another interpretation of the butler’s forgetfulness, God rebuked Joseph and said to him “The chief butler forgot thee, but I will not forget thee.’ Who would have expected that a child should be born to Abraham and Sarah in their old age? Who would have expected that Jacob, who crossed the Jordan with but his staff, should increase and become wealthy?” 281 This particular interpretation continued with a list of interventions by God in hopeless circumstances, compiling by the examples an argument that Joseph should have trusted in God rather than in the memory of the butler.

This interpretation of Joseph forsaking God and relying on man by asking the butler to remember him was also recorded in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan. It is noted in the targum concerning this event that “Joseph, leaving his higher trust and retaining confidence in a man, said to the chief butler, But be thou mindful of me when it shall be well with thee, and act kindly by me, and remember me before Pharaoh and obtain my deliverance from this prison house.” 282 The writer of the targum then went on to make the point of Joseph rejecting God more explicit:

But because, Joseph had withdrawn from the mercy that is above, and had put his confidence in the chief butler, he waited on the flesh. Therefore the chief butler did not remember Joseph, but forgot him, until from the Lord came the time of the end that he should be released. 283

Again, Ephrem’s comments seem to show a close attentiveness to the difficulties in the text, and a familiarity in some form with Jewish exegetical traditions. 284

One interesting facet of Ephrem’s Commentary on Genesis is his lack of emphasis on the dreams and interpretation of dreams which is so much a part of the Joseph narrative in the text of Genesis. 285 This was particularly true in Ephrem’s comments on Joseph’s

280 Genesis Rabbah LXXXVIII.7.
281 Ibid.
283 Ibid.
284 Archimandite Ephrem in his translation of Sermon on Joseph the Most Virtuous has noted some of the above similarities, and observed in addition the similarities with Philo On Joseph XIX.99 “the chief butler forgot him…perhaps because the ungrateful are always forgetful of their benefactors, perhaps also in the providence of God Who willed that the happy events which befell the youth should be due to God rather than to man”[Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: 1966).] He noted also the reference in Josephus Antiquities of the Jews II.74: “Joseph, however, for two full years endured the miseries of bondage, without receiving any aid from the butler in memory of his predictions, until God released him from prison”[Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961).]
285 This is also true of the sermon in Greek attributed to him, Sermon on Joseph, the Most Virtuous.
interpretation of Pharaoh’s dreams and consequent rise to a position of authority in Egypt. Unlike the Genesis account, Ephrem did not go into detail in describing the two dreams of Pharaoh, instead he summarized it by noting “Pharaoh then saw twin dreams, one of ears of grain and one of cows.” He went on to note concerning these dreams that “Although they are easily interpreted by every one, for the sake of Joseph they were hidden even from the wise men of Pharaoh.” Ephrem engages here in a purposeful denigration of Joseph’s interpretation. The dreams could easily have been interpreted by Pharaoh’s wise men, but God prevented this from happening so that Joseph would benefit from the interpretation. However, even here Ephrem noted it was not so much the interpretation of the dream that impressed Pharaoh as the wise counsel he offered: “Joseph became great in the eyes of Pharaoh through his interpretation of Pharaoh’s dreams but even more through the beneficial counsel that his mind had devised.”

It is important also to note that in the earlier account of Joseph’s dreams concerning his family, the dreams are also summarized as “Joseph dreamed dreams: the first of sheaves; and the second of the sun, moon, and eleven stars, bowing down to him.” Likewise the incident in prison with the butler and baker is also shortened into “He also interpreted there two dreams for two of Pharaoh’s servants; one was hung as Joseph told him and the other ‘placed the cup in Pharaoh’s hand’ as Joseph had interpreted for him.”

It is difficult to determine Ephrem’s exact reasons for deemphasizing the interpretation of dreams in the Joseph pericope. One possible factor though may be that Ephrem was deliberately trying to counter the popular connection of Joseph with magic and the art of interpreting dreams. One of the few pagan references to Joseph can be found in Justinus’ Epitome of the Philippic History of Pompeius Trogus. The Epitome noted that Joseph had been sold into Egypt “where he mastered the art of magic by his quick intelligence and soon became a great favorite of the king.” Joseph’s popularity

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286 Ephrem Commentary on Genesis XXXV.4.
287 Ibid.
288 Ibid.
289 Ibid., XXXIII.1.2.
290 Ibid., XXXV.3.2.
with the king is attributed to his being “shrewd with omens” and as the originator of the interpretation of dreams.\textsuperscript{292} The \textit{Epitome} then noted of Joseph:

It seemed that no aspect of divine or human order was beyond his knowledge, so that he foretold barrenness in the fields many years before the event, and all Egypt would have perished in the resulting famine had not the king issued an edict on Joseph’s advice and ordered crops to be stored up over a number of years. So successful was he when put to the test that his predictions seemed to be made by a god rather than a man.\textsuperscript{293}

Marcel Simon has noted the connections that the ancient world made between the Jews and magic. “In the opinion of the ancients, magic was, as it were, congenital to Israel.”\textsuperscript{294} Louis Feldman argued that this element of Judaism was an attraction for converts from other religions, including Christians.\textsuperscript{295} Feldman listed canon 49 of the Council of Elvira, forbidding the blessing of fields by rabbis, and canon 36 of the Council of Laodicea, forbidding Christians to make phylacteries to be used possibly as amulets, as evidence of the attraction of Jewish magic to Christians.\textsuperscript{296} Hans Drijvers has also commented on this phenomenon, noting in particular the influence of Jewish rabbis as “well-known soothsayers, magicians, and healers, who were held in high esteem by the Christians also, who often used their services or consulted them.”\textsuperscript{297} Simon saw this influence of Jewish magic as having an enduring affect on Christians: “Even when the flowering period of proselytism was over, although the competition weakened, Judaism thus continued to manifest its presence, in indirect and very humble ways, and to exercise a dangerous influence on the Church from inside.”\textsuperscript{298}

Ephrem, as numerous studies have shown, could be quite virulent in his rhetorical attacks upon the Jews.\textsuperscript{299} One should particularly note here his \textit{Hymns Against Julian

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\textsuperscript{292} Ibid., 36.8  
\textsuperscript{293} Ibid., 36.8-10.  
\textsuperscript{296} Ibid., 380-381.  
\textsuperscript{298} Simon, 341.  
and *Nisibene Hymn* 67, where he refers to the notorious anti-Semitic barb of the “stink of the Jews”, and *Hymn on the Unleavened Bread* 17, 18, and 19. But, in the case of his rewriting the figure of Joseph without focusing on the interpretation of dreams, there is a more subtle polemic at work based on changes of emphasis, whereby Ephrem moved Joseph away from popular associations with magic.

Ephrem went on to describe Joseph’s exaltation by Pharaoh to a position of authority in Egypt. Ephrem stayed close to the text here, only adding the detail that the ring Pharaoh placed on his finger “had never been placed on the hand of a non-Egyptian.” Ephrem also noted that when Pharaoh said to Joseph “I am Pharaoh, but without your word no one will lift hand or foot in all Egypt,” that in this command, “Included among those who were to be subservient to him were all the army commanders and the princes of the king.” This comment, though not stated directly by Ephrem, is connected to Genesis 39.1 where Potiphar, Joseph’s master at the time, was described as being “one of Pharaoh’s officials, the captain of the guard.” Thus, for Ephrem, Potiphar would have been present in the court of Pharaoh as one of his officials. This then became the basis for an intriguing extra-canonical story arising from this possibility. Ephrem noted, “Joseph’s [former] master was there when the dreams of Pharaoh were being interpreted.”

The questions that arise from this possibility are many. What would Potiphar think of this exaltation of his former slave? Would he be afraid of Joseph? Would he begin to doubt the story of his wife? What would be the response of Potiphar’s wife to this reversal of fortune? Would she now come forward with the truth? Ephrem addressed some of these questions in a haggadic story of Potiphar returning to his wife with the news of Joseph’s new position of authority in Egypt. Ephrem noted that Potiphar returned quickly to his house, and with a twist of irony to the story he commented “In his haste to go to tell his wife of [Joseph’s] greatness, he closely resembled his wife when

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300 See the discussion in Hayman, 427-432.
301 Ephrem, *Commentary on Genesis* XXXV.6.1.
302 Gen 41.44.
303 Ephrem *Commentary on Genesis* XXXV.6.2.
304 Ibid., XXXV.7.
she had come out to meet him to accuse Joseph." Potiphar then told his wife of Joseph, relating the news in a series of contrasts to the way they had treated him and the way Pharaoh had now exalted him:

> He whom we sent to prison without clothing, Pharaoh has now clothed with a garment of fine white linen. He whom we cast prostrate into prison now sits upon the chariot of Pharaoh. He whom we had bound in irons now has a gold necklace set on his neck…How then can I look upon him whom my eyes are unable to look upon? Potiphar’s wife does not react with the panic apparent in her husband. In her response she was characterized by Ephrem in a positive light as the comforter of her husband. She addressed Potiphar stoically: “Do not fear Joseph to whom you did no evil, for he knows that the disgrace that came upon him in our domicile, whether justly or not, came upon him from my own hands.” Potiphar’s wife then encourages her husband to accompany the other officials and captains as they follow Joseph. She then confessed to her husband the truth behind the events that had sent Joseph to prison: “I was enamored of Joseph when I falsely accused him. I made assault on his clothing because I was overcome by his beauty. If he is just, it is I whom he will bring to grief and not you.” Potiphar’s wife argued, however, that Joseph should not bring grief to her, because if he had not been wronged he would not have been imprisoned, If he had not been imprisoned he would not have interpreted the dreams of Pharaoh and he would not have come to this royal dignity of which you just informed me. Although, we did not actually exalt him, it is as if we did exalt him, for it was due to our afflicting him that he has been accorded such honor and has become second to the king.

Buttressed by his wife’s encouragement, Potiphar returned to his position and followed behind Joseph’s chariot with the other officials and captains of Pharaoh. Ephrem reported that Joseph did not bring grief to Potiphar over the incident with his

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305 Ibid.
306 Ibid. This is an interesting twist on the very common lists of reversals of fortune for Joseph in Jewish literature. See Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, vol. 2, 73. “The mouth that refused the kiss of unlawful passion and sin received the kiss of homage from the people; the neck that did not bow itself unto sin was adorned with the gold chain that Pharaoh put upon it; the hands that did not come in contact with sin was arrayed in vesture of byssus; the feet that made no steps in the direection of sin reposed in the royal chariot, and the thoughts that kept themselves undefiled by sin were proclaimed as wisdom.” See note 183 in vol. 5 for references to these lists.
307 Ibid., XXXV.8.
308 Ibid.
309 Ibid.
wife, but for a different reason than she had surmised. Instead of crediting Potiphar’s wife and her temptation of Joseph as the ultimate cause of the chain of events that led to his exaltation, Joseph gave credit to God:

He knew that it was God who had permitted his brothers to throw him into the pit in the desert, and [who had delivered him] from the pit, in order to send him in irons to Egypt, and who had permitted his master to send him to prison so that from that humble seat He might set him upon the chariot of Pharaoh.310

This extra-canonical story of Potiphar and his wife is not attested in the extant Jewish literature. It is, however, repeated in the Sermon on Joseph the Most Virtuous. Potiphar (here Petephres) ran to his wife, who comforted him by confession of her sin against Joseph. “I will tell you my sin. I did this. I was in love with Joseph the all-virtuous, that chaste youth, and hour by hour with many enticements I lay in ambush for him, so that I might sleep with him and enjoy his beauty.”311 She then revealed to Petephres that she had seized his garment, but Joseph had fled from her. She again claims responsibility for his rise to power, saying “I am the cause of his kingship and his surpassing glory. For if I had not been passionate for Joseph, he would not have been thrown into prison, but he owes me thanks, who have become the cause of his glory.”312 She counsels her husband to return to Joseph, for “Joseph is just and holy, because when falsely accused, he did not reveal it to anyone. Get up then, and go with joy, and bow down before him with the nobles.”313

This story with some alteration was also recorded in The Ethiopic History of Joseph. Here Potiphar (Qatifan in this work) hides from Joseph, and comes to his wife in anger, suspecting that she was deceptive in her accusations against Joseph. “As for myself, I now know that it was not Joseph who transgressed against you. But, surely you yourself, in your own [desire for] adultery and evil [design], lusted [after him because of] his beauty and majesty.”314 Qatifan seems to do a bit of detective work, noting that “For, had it been he who had desired you, as you say, it would have been you who would have

310 Ibid., XXXV.9.
311 Sermon on Joseph the Most Virtuous lines 636-639.
312 Ibid., lines 640-643.
313 Ibid., lines 643-645.
314 The Ethiopic History of Joseph fol. 141a.
abandoned your garment [in his hand] and fled from him.” Qatifan’s wife then responded to her husband, “Yes! It was I who transgressed against Joseph! I spoke a lie against him! I did evil against him!” As in the other accounts, she counsels him not to worry because it was her wrongdoing, but in addition she promises to him “I shall make him [Joseph] love you exceedingly more than [he loves] your colleagues, and make you chief over Pharaoh’s magistrates.”

At this point the narrative of The Ethiopic History of Joseph deviates from Ephrem’s commentary and the Sermon on Joseph the Most Virtuous. The history recorded a bizarre exchange of letters between Qatifan’s wife and Joseph. She sends him a letter asking that he forgive her husband, and Joseph replies with thankfulness that her deed has caused his rise to power. He exalts Qatifan to “chief of all Pharaoh’s judges,” sends a gift of garments to her, and requests that she and her husband come to see him soon. When Qatifan and his wife do make the visit, Joseph receives them graciously and praises Qatifan’s wife “before the elders of the people of Egypt, and revealed to them her kindness.” He then sent them home with more gifts, and officially made Qatifan chief over Pharaoh’s officers.

The Ethiopic History of Joseph has been dated to the 14th or early 15th century, which is far removed from the time in which Ephrem is writing (4th century). E. Isaac, however, has proposed that the contents of the history seem to point to the document being a copy of a much earlier work. He has suggested “Overall the preponderant characteristics of this work, whatever the Ethiopic Vorlage is, point to a Jewish work of the late Second Temple period from which a large number of our apocryphal and pseudepigraphic works come.” In light of this observation, Ephrem’s commentary has preserved a haggadic tradition concerning the story of Joseph that is otherwise not attested in the extant literature. Ephrem was writing his commentary during a period when much of the Talmudic and Midrashic literature was still in the process of formation. Ephrem was

315 Ibid.
316 Ibid.
317 Ibid., folio 141b
318 Ibid., fol. 141b-142b. Strangely, Joseph addressed Qatifan’s wife in his letter as “my lady/mistress forever!”
319 Ibid., fol.142b-143a.
320 Introduction to The Ethiopic History of Joseph, 44.
321 The earliest redactions of these materials falling around 5th century, thus placing Ephrem and his writings well within their formative period.
conversant with these traditions, and yet demonstrated a freedom to choose and adapt the available legends and traditions to the interests of his commentary.

Ephrem’s final comment on Joseph’s rise to leadership in Egypt, before the narrative turns to the appearance of his brothers, was that his plan unveiled to Pharaoh in the interpretation of his dreams was a success. He gathered grain from the cities of Egypt during the years of plenty in order to have grain during the years of famine. Ephrem here again added information that is not found in the account in Genesis. He noted that during the years of famine, “Joseph took special care of the orphans, widows, and every needy person in Egypt so that there was no anxiety in Egypt.” Ephrem’s comment here is very close to that found in the New Testament book of James, where the nature of true religion is described. The writer here describes, “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” It is possible that Ephrem was alluding to this verse as a background text for the life of Joseph. He was an example, in the episode of Potiphar’s wife, of one keeping away from pollution by the world, and here in the episode of the famine he also cares for orphans and widows. Joseph then was an exemplar of pure and faultless religion. This is an intriguing possibility since the book of James is from a Jewish-Christian context- a context that is often claimed as the foundation for Syrian Christianity. It must also be noted that Ephrem may have in mind here the common command in the Torah to not neglect or abuse the “fatherless and the widows.” Interestingly, there was also often attached to this command an additional exhortation to care for the “alien.” In this case, Ephrem has the alien, Joseph, fulfilling the command to care for the orphans and widows.

In summary, the portrait of Joseph sketched by Ephrem in his *Commentary on Genesis* stayed very close to the lines drawn in the text of Genesis. What is conspicuously missing in his commentary is the allegorical exegesis found in Origen’s homilies on Genesis. Ephrem paid close attention to the text of the Genesis narrative, and did not see

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322 Ephrem *Commentary on Genesis* XXXVI.1.
323 Ibid.
324 James 1.27.
326 See Ex 22.22; Dt. 10.18, 14.29, 24.17, 24.19, 26.12. Note also Ps 68.5, 146.9.
the characters as symbols of deeper truths. In addition, Ephrem’s commentary lacks the typological exegesis that was common in Aphrahat and the exegetes of the Antiochene school of exegesis; although he commonly used typology in his hymns and sermons. One example of this applied to the character of Joseph can be found in “Hymn 8” in Ephrem’s *Hymns on Virginity*. He began the hymn with the observation that “In Eden and in the inhabited earth are parables of our Lord.” He then goes on to find types that prefigure Christ in the Jewish Scriptures, particularly of the patriarchs. Concerning the sons of Jacob he observed:

On the tribes of Jacob your twelve are imprinted: on Judah your robe, and on Levi your censer, and your dispensation on Joseph.

Here Ephrem attributed to Jesus the position of king, priest, and prophet as symbolized through the three sons of Jacob, Judah, Levi, and Joseph. Ephrem in this hymn read Joseph not as an allegory of Christ, but as a type constituting one part of the identity of Christ.

Ephrem does show a familiarity with extra-canonical, haggadic stories and traditions, which he freely chooses and adapts in his commentary. Ephrem seems to use these stories and traditions to address questions and lacunae in the Genesis narrative in a manner that resembles the Midrashic and Talmudic literature. Ephrem’s familiarity and use of Jewish traditions was due in part to his vocation as the Interpreter at the Christian school in Nisibis. Part of his responsibility within this position would have been, as Kathleen McVey has pointed out, “the elaboration of a Christian interpretation of the Old Testament--one that could compete with the growing sophistication of the rabbinic schools and attract to Christianity the uncertain, whether of Aramean pagan or Jewish background.” His task, however, was made more difficult by the uniqueness of his location in comparison to his contemporaries among the church fathers. Nisibis, where Ephrem spent the majority of his life, was according to Robert Murray “almost the first

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327 Ephrem *Hymns on Virginity*, Hymn 8.
328 Ibid.
329 Here again, Ephrem distances Joseph’s interpretation of dreams from the connotation of magic, viewing them instead as a prophetic dispensation from God.
330 McVey, 14.
place in the east to have a Jewish school.”331 Thus for Ephrem, “The uniqueness of his endeavor lay in the fact that he taught in a city where the rabbinic traditions were well-established and sophisticated and where the Jewish community may have been more prosperous and numerous than its Christian counterpart.”332

Both Aphrahat and Ephrem lived, worshiped, and wrote in a region with a strong Jewish community possessing an established history of interpretation of the scriptures. In light of this, the writings of Aphrahat and Ephrem show engagement not only with the traditions of Hellenistic Judaism (as in other early Christian literature) but also with the growing literature of Rabbinic Judaism. Thus as Drijvers noted, “Ephrem Syrus’ works like those of Aphrahat and Origen in the third century reflect Jewish learning and actual discussions on theological matters with Jewish rabbis and scribes.”333 However, particularly in Aphrahat and Ephrem’s case, there was adaptation of this Jewish material to produce a Christian reading of the Joseph narrative.

**Chapter Six:**

**Joseph in the Homilies of John Chrysostom**

John Chrysostom was born in the city of Antioch in Syria around 349 C.E. As a youth, he received rhetorical training under the famous pagan orator, Libanius.334 The rhetorical skills he gained under Libanius served him well throughout his career, gaining him renown as a skilled preacher in the churches of Antioch and later at Constantinople. His ability eventually gained him after his death the epithet of the name Chrysostom, or golden-mouth. Chrysostom also received spiritual training in an ascetical school presided over by Diodore, one of the leaders in the Orthodox Church at Antioch.335 Here Chrysostom would study with his fellow pupil Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428), and both of them would become prime examples of Diodore’s exegetical method known eventually as the Antiochene school of exegesis. Diodore disdained the allegorical method of interpretation represented by the Alexandrian school of such writers as

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332 McVey, 15.
Clement and Origen, and instead, “championed straightforward, historical exegesis, while allowing that the historical events could foreshadow spiritual realities later to be revealed.”

Chrysostom was ordained as a priest in 386 by Flavian, the bishop of Antioch, and served him, more or less, as a personal assistant taking over most of the bishop’s speaking responsibilities in the churches of the see of Antioch. It was during this period of his life that many of the extant collections of his homilies were composed, and it is here that he “established forever his title as the greatest of Christian pulpit orators.” In 398 John was appointed, against his will, the bishop of Constantinople, the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire. Here John experienced strained relations with the imperial court and with the priests whom he oversaw in his duties as bishop, but he was beloved by the common people who came to hear him deliver sermons on a weekly basis. John’s strained relations eventually led to his condemnation at the Synod of the Oak in 403, which was presided over by John’s archenemy Theophilus the bishop of Alexandria. John was eventually deposed as bishop and died in exile in 407. In the face of “popular pressure” the abuses of the Synod of the Oak were later recognized and John’s reputation was rehabilitated. In 438 John’s remains were brought back from exile, and formally interred at the Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople.

As Johannes Quasten has noted, “Among the Greek Fathers none has left so extensive a literary legacy as Chrysostom.” This collection of texts is particularly rich in the area

336 Ibid., 19. Recent scholarship has found the distinction between the two schools to be less clear than Diodore and his students may have imagined. Both schools approached the text with theological convictions and interpreted the text in light of those convictions. Both schools drew extensively from commonly agreed stocks of typologies (i.e the sacrifice of Isaac, the crossing of the Red Sea). And, though the Antiochene school valued the historical narrative meaning of the text, all representatives of its thought made room for a higher spiritual meaning. See the discussion in Joseph Trigg, *Biblical Interpretation*, 34 and J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 72-73.


341 Quasten, 429.
of exegetical homilies, comprising sermons by Chrysostom on Genesis, Psalms, Isaiah and most of the books of the New Testament. Throughout these exegetical homilies, Chrysostom draws on key figures in Jewish history to illustrate the points of his exegesis. These figures include such notables as Job, Daniel, David, Moses, Abraham, Jacob, and most importantly for this study, the figure of Joseph. Chrysostom focused on two key events in the life of Joseph: Joseph’s relationship with his brothers and the attempted seduction of Joseph by Potiphar’s wife. These events in the life of Joseph were used to portray him as a moral exemplar, particularly focusing on his patience and endurance through suffering and his temperance or chastity in the face of his confrontation with Potiphar’s wife.

**Typology**

Before looking at Chrysostom’s use of Joseph as a moral exemplar, it is important to note that he does associate the visit of Joseph to his brothers and his betrayal by them as a typology that points to events in the life of Jesus. This typology was alluded to in Chrysostom’s homily on the speech of Stephen in Acts 7. In Acts 7.9 Stephen narrated the sale of Joseph by his brethren, and Chrysostom concluded that this event was, “the type of Christ. Though they had no fault to find with him, and though he came on purpose to bring them their food, they thus ill-treated him.” This typology was further developed in Chrysostom’s *Homilies on Genesis*. In Homily 61 Chrysostom noted that Joseph was sent by his father to visit his brothers “so that Joseph’s regard for his brothers might be demonstrated and their murderous intent might come to light.” Chrysostom added, however, “it happened also as a type of things to come, the outlines of truth being sketched out ahead of time in shadows.”

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342 Ibid., 434-450.
343 Note also that Chrysostom viewed Joseph’s silence in the face of the false accusations of Potiphar’s wife as a type of Christ’s silence in the face of his persecutors. “What then did Joseph? He held his peace, and thus is condemned, even as Christ is also. For all those things are types of these.” See John Chrysostom, *The Homilies of S. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the Gospel of St. Matthew*, 3 vols. (Oxford: J.H. Parker, 1843), Vol 3, Hom 84.4.
346 Ibid.
was, according to Chrysostom, to be found in that Joseph willingly went to his brothers, who betrayed him in their desire to kill him and in their eventual sale of their brother to desert traders. Likewise, “our Lord in fidelity to his characteristic love came to visit the human race; taking flesh of the same source as ours and deigning to become our brother, he thus arrived amongst us.”

Chrysostom found the precedence for this typology in Heb 2.16-17, noting the relationship of Christ taking on flesh to be like his “brothers”: “It is not the condition of angels he takes to himself but descent from Abraham-hence the need for him to become like his brothers in everything.” These brothers were the “unresponsive Jews,” who, however, went further than Joseph’s brothers, carrying out their desire to kill by “crucifying the one who deigned to take on the form of a slave for our salvation.”

Chrysostom highlighted the importance of the difference between the two noting, “The type had to convey less than the reality- otherwise it would not have been a type of what was to come later. Hence, in that case, things were prefigured as in shadow.”

This example of Chrysostom’s use of typology is illustrative of the parameters observed by him when progressing beyond his usual literal or moral exegesis into a spiritual meaning for the text. Chrysostom sought in this typology a clear textual precedence for looking beyond its literal meaning. In this case, the similarities of Joseph being betrayed by his brothers to Jesus’ own life were highlighted by the text of Acts 7. Stephen’s speech in Acts 7 recorded several events in the history of Israel, connected in part by a theme of rejection and persecution of key prophetic figures such as Joseph and Moses. Stephen ends the speech by associating this theme with the rejection of Jesus by the people of his own time: “Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers.” In addition, Chrysostom cited support for his typology in the passage from Heb 2.16-17, which connected Jesus’ incarnation into flesh as a coming in order to be like his “brothers.”

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347 Ibid.
348 Ibid.
349 Ibid., 61.11.
350 Ibid.
351 For more detail see the discussion above on this passage.
352 Acts 7.52.
These scriptural precedents thus allowed Chrysostom the latitude to view the betrayal of Joseph as prefiguring Christ’s betrayal “in shadow.” The idea of these events as shadows is in part similar to the idea of shadows from Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave.” Chrysostom viewed the Holy Spirit as casting a light which illumined the events of Jesus’ earthly life, and in that light events from the history of Israel were cast as shadows. The shadows mirror events in the life of Jesus, but only in the form of outlines. In order to understand these types and their fulfillment in the life of Jesus, the interpreter must be illumined by the Spirit. In this sense, Chrysostom’s use of typology bares similarities to the allegorical interpretation seen earlier in Origen’s homilies. At issue for both approaches was the relevance of the Old Testament to the New, and the connections that could be forged between them for the reader of these texts. Chrysostom, however, as a member of the Antiochene School was more reticent in his use of a spiritual interpretation than Origen.

Moral Exegesis

Chrysostom demonstrated in his homilies a marked preference for moral or exhortatory exegesis. Manlio Simonetti noted that “the primary objective of his rhetorical output was to draw out of the sacred text a lesson to educate, warn, or edify his listeners, rather than to illustrate the text for its own sake.” This preference for exhortatory homilies is certainly noticeable in Chrysostom’s use of the figure of Joseph

353 Chrysostom, *Homilies On Genesis* 61.11. Note that Tertullian in *An Answer to the Jews* 10 also viewed the betrayal of Joseph by his brothers as a type of Christ.

354 See Plato, *The Republic* VII.514 A-521 B.

355 See chapters 4-6 of Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity*. Dawson argued for a closer association between allegorical and figural/typological readings of scripture. Note that the issue of relevance was also key to Philo’s allegorical exegesis of the Pentateuch, but in his case Philo was specifically concerned with making the message relevant to the philosophical ideas of a Hellenistic world.

356 Chrysostom’s reticence may also be credited to his preference (see following discussion) for moral/exhortatory exposition and, as such, he viewed the use of typology as divergences from the central point of his message. In the example above, Chrysostom followed this typology of Joseph’s betrayal with a transitional notice, “Let us now return, however; to the theme of our sermon” (*Homilies On Genesis* 61.12). Note also that Chrysostom may have observed more typologies than he included in his sermons. In the example of Joseph’s silence in the face of accusations, Chrysostom noted that “For all those things are types of these,” pointing perhaps toward events of Joseph’s life in general instead of a few select events (*Homilies on Matt* 84.4).

as a moral exemplar. Joseph was an important example for Chrysostom, because he preceded the giving of the Mosaic Law. In a discussion concerning being patient while undergoing suffering, Chrysostom noted that he could use Moses as an example but he desired to go back even further. Chrysostom argued that, “The greater the antiquity of the examples cited, the more we are convinced by them.” The reason for placing greater weight on pre-Mosaic figures was that in their time, “virtue was harder to practice. For those who then were living did not have commandments written down, or the example of men’s lives.” Chrysostom then used Noah and Joseph as exemplars of patient endurance of suffering. As noted earlier, Henry Chadwick argued that this was a common practice of the patristic writers who desired to “look back to the patriarchs before Moses who had no Law to keep other than the moral imperative of the inward conscience.” Focusing on these pre-Mosaic figures, was one weapon used in the apologetic distinction of patristic writers between Christian and Jewish claims on the history of Israel. Thus, as Eusebius noted, Christians tied themselves to the pre-Mosaic patriarchs because the later Israelites “were unable through moral weakness to emulate the virtue of their fathers, inasmuch as they were enslaved by passions and sick in soul.”

Chrysostom’s moral allusions to Joseph focused on two key events in his life: his relationship with his brothers and his confrontation with Potiphar’s wife. The prominence of the theme of Joseph’s relationship with his brothers in patristic literature has been noted by M. Dulaey. Chrysostom focused particularly on Joseph’s patient endurance of the suffering caused by his brothers, and his willingness to forgive them for their intrigues against him. Chrysostom noted that Joseph’s visit to his brothers as they were shepherding in the fields was made in good faith, without any suspicion or malice toward them: “he set off to them carrying provisions; he used no caution; he committed

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359 Ibid.
360 Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 67. Note the discussion earlier, where Heb 11 was shown to be the first example of this preference for pre-Mosaic figures.
361 Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel*, 7.8, 312d. See below for a fuller discussion of this idea in Eusebius.
all to God: nay, the more they held him in the light of an enemy, the more did he treat
them as brothers.”363 This was to serve as an example to Chrysostom’s listeners, that
relationships with outsiders should be characterized by “simplicity” in order to imitate the
early Christians from the book of Acts who had “favour with all people.”364

The brothers, however, were envious of Joseph and this was the source of their
betrayal of him.365 Chrysostom argued that envy was capable of destroying charity and
disrupting the lives of his parishioners, because “the despotism of envy has upset whole
churches and laid waste the whole world.”366 This was exemplified in that, “because of it
his brothers [plotted to kill] Joseph; because of it the Devil [seeks to] destroy all men.”367

Chrysostom heavy-handedly censured the conduct of the brothers, and as a result his
depiction of their relationship with Joseph was cast in clear black and white, good versus
evil categories.368 Chrysostom lamented the cruelty of the brothers, noting “even though
they had been provided by him with nourishment they tried to deprive him of his life and
freedom.”369 This cruelty was even more starkly portrayed in that the brothers sat down
and ate the food Joseph brought them, while he was lying naked in an adjacent cistern.

Chrysostom concluded: “What could be worse than this savagery? Were they not worse
than murderers?”370 Chrysostom also accused the brothers of “unlawful frenzy” and
“dreadful malice.”371 This heavy censure of the brothers was likely influenced by the
typology, discussed earlier, where the brothers’ betrayal of Joseph was linked by
Chrysostom to Jesus’ betrayal and crucifixion by the “unresponsive Jews.”372

Chrysostom is infamous for his anti-Semitic barbs, particularly in the series of sermons
Discourses Against Judaizing Christians, which criticized parishioners who participated

Apostles, Vol 1, Hom VII, p. 104. See also his Homilies on I Corinthians 25.4, where Joseph goes
willingly to his brothers, because he “prefers the care of his brethren above all.”
364 Ibid., p. 103.
365 Chrysostom’s focus on envy as the cause of Joseph’s suffering mirrors I Clement 4.9: “Jealousy caused
Joseph to be persecuted nearly to death and to be sold into slavery.” Note the earlier discussion of this
passage and its parallels in Philo and Josephus.
366 John Chrysostom, Commentary on Saint John the Apostle and Evangelist; Homilies 1-47, trans. Thomas
367 Ibid.
368 The Biblical narrative is far more nuanced, and depicts Joseph’s dreams and the exalted position granted
to him by his father Jacob, as contributing factors in the brothers’ hatred for Joseph.
369 Chrysostom, Commentary on Saint John the Apostle and Evangelist; Homilies 48-88, Hom 71, p. 267.
370 Ibid.
371 Chrysostom, Homilies on Genesis 46-67, 61.16.
372 Ibid., 61.11.
in Jewish festivals.\textsuperscript{373} As noted before, the speech by Stephen in Acts 7 had earlier made the connection between Joseph’s brothers and the Jewish community that had rejected Jesus, and Chrysostom also consistently made this connection in his polemic against the brothers.

The envy of Joseph’s brothers and their sale of him to desert traders, became, according to Chrysostom, the immediate cause of Joseph’s years of suffering in Egypt.\textsuperscript{374} Chrysostom argued that his brothers, “betrayed him to ten-thousand deaths by selling him to savage and uncouth men, who were about to go away to foreign peoples.”\textsuperscript{375} Joseph, however, did not hold this grievance against his brothers, but was willing to do good to his enemies. Chrysostom noted that while in prison Joseph interpreted the cupbearer or butler’s dream, and asked him to remember him when he was restored to favor by Pharaoh. Joseph then explained to the cupbearer why he was in prison, but Chrysostom noted that in Joseph’s explanation, “though he had been sold, and made a slave, and had tenanted a prison, uttered not even then a bitter word against the authors of his sorrows.”\textsuperscript{376} Instead, Joseph simply noted that, “Indeed I was stolen away out of the land of the Hebrews,” but as Chrysostom noted he “addeth not by whom.”\textsuperscript{377} Joseph did this because, “he feels more ashamed for the wickednesses of his brethren, than they who wrought them.”\textsuperscript{378} Chrysostom exhorted his listeners to imitate Joseph’s attitude, arguing that “Such too ought to be our disposition, to grieve for them who wrong us, more than they themselves do. For the hurt passeth on to them.”\textsuperscript{379} In another homily, Chrysostom argued similarly that Joseph’s forgiveness and acceptance of his brothers should be an example to his parishioners in their treatment of enemies. Chrysostom exhorted them to action, arguing “Since we know all of this, let us forgive the trespasses of our neighbors

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{373} See Chrysostom, \textit{Discourses against Judaizing Christians}. Chrysostom referred repeatedly in these discourses to the Jewish community in Antioch as “pitiful and miserable” (Disc 1.1.4, 1.2.1, 4.1.1). For a learned discussion of these texts and on Jewish and Christian relationships in Chrysostom’s Antioch see Wilken, \textit{John Chrysostom and the Jews: Rhetoric and Reality in the Late 4th Century}.
\item \textsuperscript{374} Note, however, the discussion below concerning the role of Providence in the direction of Joseph’s life.
\item \textsuperscript{377} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{378} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{379} Ibid. Chrysostom placed this exhortation within a Eucharistic context, arguing that no one should come to the table harboring anger toward an enemy. The reason for this was that the participant in the Eucharist must remember “the Subject of the Sacrifice, that he was sacrificed for enemies” (Hom 5.5). As such, Chrysostom may be alluding to another typological interpretation of an event in the life of Joseph.
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and repay them with the opposite that we may obtain the mercy of God.”

Joseph was a particularly powerful example to follow, according to Chrysostom, because he was a pre-Mosaic figure from the history of Israel: “For what excuse shall we have, after being given the Law and grace and such true wisdom, if we do not even emulate him who came before the giving of grace and the Law?”

Joseph patiently endured under the suffering that began with his brothers, and Chrysostom pictured his steadfastness as characteristic of an athlete under the pressure of competition. Chrysostom noted that, even though Joseph would “suffer trial upon trial,” he endured as a “noble athlete.” This was particularly true of Joseph’s time in prison, and for Chrysostom, this period of Joseph’s life was depicted as one of the great challenges to Joseph’s faith in the promises of God. Chrysostom described Joseph during his stay in prison as an “athlete under pressure,” who was “competing in some gymnasium or wrestling ring, giving a demonstration of his characteristic virtue by not showing signs of alarm, panic, or disappointment.”

Even when the cupbearer, whose dream Joseph had interpreted, forgot his promise to remember Joseph when restored to his position, Joseph still did not lose hope. Instead, as a virtuous athlete, “he realized that the race was longer for him, so that by striving consistently he might win a glorious crown.”

Part of the difficulty of this experience for Joseph was attributed to the conditions of the prison he was resident in. Chrysostom described the fellow prisoners he was housed with as “squalid and filthy people,” who were condemned as “murderers, grave robbers, thieves, and perpetrators of countless crimes.” Chrysostom also noted the harshness

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380 Chrysostom, Commentary on Saint John the Apostle and Evangelist: Homilies 48-88, 267-68.
381 Chrysostom, Homilies on Genesis 46-67, 267. See the discussion above concerning the importance of pre-Mosaic figures in the patristic writings. Ambrose argued along similar lines that Joseph’s forgiveness of his brothers was remarkable: “Therefore, one deserves to be noticed who did this before the Gospel, who showed compassion when harmed and forgiveness when attacked, who did not repay injury when put up for sale but paid out grace for insult- the conduct we have all learned after the Gospel yet cannot observe.” See his De Ioseph in Ambrose, Seven Exegetical Works, trans. Michael P. McHugh (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1972), 1.3.
383 Ibid., 63.9, 11.
385 Chrysostom, Homilies on Genesis 46-67, 63.7, 11.
that was typical of most custodians of prisons, labeling them as “wild beasts.”

Prison keepers were “practiced in cruelty….They profit by the misfortune of others, and harass those whom others support in their afflictions, making a gain of them that is truly deplorable, with a more than brutal cruelty.”

Chrysostom’s criticism of the prison keeper was possibly drawn from a similar description by Philo. He noted in his treatise On Joseph that “Everyone knows how full of inhumanity and cruelty gaolers are: pitiless by nature and casehardened by practice, they are brutalized day by day towards savagery.”

The reason for their inhumanity was that:

- they spend their days with footpads, thieves, burglars, men of violence and outrage, who commit rape, murder, adultery and sacrilege, and from each of these they imbibe and accumulate something of their villainy, out of which miscellaneous amalgam they produce a single body of evil, a fusion of every sort of pollution.

The similarities between the two accounts continued in Chrysostom’s recognition that Joseph was treated kindly by the prison keeper, because “the virtue of the soul can mollify even wild beasts.” Likewise, Philo noted that the prison keeper was “tamed by the nobility of the youth.”

Since the prison keeper had been mollified or tamed, he allowed Joseph to become a ruler or governor of the prison, and Chrysostom related this to his governance of the house of Potiphar: “Thus, Joseph was again a ruler, he ruled in prison as he had ruled in the house.” Chrysostom argued that this was good preparation for Joseph’s eventual position as governor of Egypt, for “it was fit that he who was to be a governor, should first be an excellent ruler of the house.”

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386 John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Epistles of St. Paul the Apostle to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon, trans. Philip Schaff, vol. XIII, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956), 534. Chrysostom’s depiction of the baseness of life in the prison was likely due to his desire that his parishioners visit the needy in prison. Chrysostom argued that Joseph was an example of “estimable men” who can be found in prisons. See Chrysostom, Commentary on Saint John the Apostle and Evangelist; Homilies 48-88, 147. Based on this example, parishioners should visit the prisons because, “The service you do to such as these gives you a return for your solicitude on behalf of all the rest. But, even if there be no one of this kind, even in this case you will have generous repayment (Ibid). For more on the theme of social action in Chrysostom’s sermons see Kelly, Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom--Ascetic, Preacher, Bishop, 97-100.

387 Chrysostom, Homilies on the Epistles of St. Paul the Apostle to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon.
388 Philo, On Joseph 81.
389 Ibid., 84.
390 Chrysostom, Homilies on the Epistles of St. Paul the Apostle to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon, 534.
391 Philo, On Joseph 84.
392 Chrysostom, Homilies on the Epistles of St. Paul the Apostle to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon, 534.
393 Ibid., 535.
recognized this relationship, noting that when Potiphar appointed Joseph as steward of his house, “in fact and reality it was nature’s doing, who was taking steps to procure for him the command of whole cities and a nation and a great country.”394 The reason for this, according to Philo, was that “the future statesman needed first to be trained and practiced in house management; for a house is a city compressed into small dimensions, and household management may be called a kind of state management.”395

The other key facet of Chrysostom’s moral exegesis was his extensive retelling of the incident of Joseph’s confrontation with Potiphar’s wife. Chrysostom labeled the woman a “wild beast,” and described her “lewdness and her machinations for his destruction.”396 Chrysostom, however, also noted her strong qualities of beauty and charm, which made her particularly alluring to Joseph: “For what was there not then to charm him? A beautiful person, the pride of rank, the costliness of garments, the fragrance of perfumes, (for all these things know how to soften the soul,) words more soft than all the rest!”397 Potiphar’s wife was not content to rest on the strength of these qualities, but rather pursued Joseph, “taking upon her the attitude of a supplicant.”398 Potiphar’s wife went to great lengths in order to entrap Joseph: “she threw herself at the knees perhaps of the captive boy, and perhaps even intreated him weeping and clasping his knees, and had recourse to this not once, and a second time, but oftentimes.”399 Chrysostom also suggested that Potiphar’s wife dressed provocatively in order to secure Joseph’s attention, so that “not simply but with excessive nicety would set off her beauty; as wishing by many nets to catch the lamb of Christ. Add here I pray also many magic charms.”400

Chrysostom’s retelling of this scene drew from a stock of legends surrounding the story of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife. This event filled with sexual suggestiveness and valiant moral stands proved ripe ground for imaginative expansions by various writers. In much of the post-Biblical literature, this part of the narrative became the most important

394 Philo, On Joseph 38.
395 Ibid.
398 Ibid.
399 Ibid.
400 Ibid.
element of Joseph’s life to be remembered.  

Louis Ginzburg recorded the midrashic legend of Potiphar’s wife dressing provocatively. The midrashic writers noted that she “arrayed herself in princely garments. She placed precious stones upon her head, onyx stones set in silver and gold, she beautified her face and her body with all sorts of things for the purifying of women.”  

Also, The Ethiopic History of Joseph noted that Potiphar’s wife longed for Joseph every day, and to entrap him, “She [painted her eyes] with antimony, she scented herself with perfume, and she changed into varieties of beautiful dresses in Joseph’s presence.”  

The later work, Sermon On Joseph the Most Virtuous attributed to Ephrem the Syrian, noted similarly that, “by changing her clothes, making up her face and decking herself in gold, the wretched woman tried to entrap with satanic nods and shameless smiles the holy eyes of the just young man.”  

The Testament of Joseph recorded, much like Chrysostom, that Potiphar’s wife employed magical charms to entice Joseph. He noted that the woman, “sent me food mixed with enchantments,” but Joseph refused to eat because of a vision given to him by God of a “frightening man who offered me a sword along with a bowl.”  

Likewise, the Testament of Reuben recorded that Potiphar’s wife, “did many things to him, summoned magicians, and brought potions for him, but his soul’s deliberation rejected evil desire.”  

A key theme throughout Chrysostom’s account of Joseph’s temptation was his extraordinary virtue of self-control or chastity. When Potiphar’s wife finally despaired of all other measures to seduce Joseph, she resorted to forceful measures grabbing his cloak and pulling him to bed with her. Joseph, however, left his cloak behind and fled naked from the woman. Chrysostom delighted in recounting this scene, drawing out the irony of the naked Joseph leaving all but his chastity behind him. Thus, in his Homilies on Genesis, Chrysostom noted that “Then one could see this remarkable man emerging,

403 The Ethiopic History of Joseph fol. 133a, p. 61. See the introduction to this translation, referenced above, which argued that the origins of this text point to a work of Jewish origin from the late Second Temple Period (43-44).
404 Sermon On Joseph the Most Virtuous lines 481-484.
407 See the earlier discussion of this key theme in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs.
divested of his clothes, but garbed in the vesture of chastity.”408 Similarly, in his
*Homilies on Matthew* Chrysostom argued that Joseph, “when he stripped himself, did
then more than ever shine forth. For to be thus naked is no evil, but to be so clad, as we
now are, with costly garments, this is both disgraceful and ridiculous.”409

Chrysostom favored this scenario when criticizing the elaborate clothing of some of
his parishioners. In *Homilies on Colossians*, Chrysostom pleaded with these parishioners
to “Put Christ about thee, and not gold; where Mammon is, there Christ is not, where
Christ is there Mammon is not.”410 Chrysostom contrasted the clothes of Potiphar’s wife
with the nakedness of Joseph as support for his exhortation: “He was naked, but clothed
in the garments of chastity; she was clothed, but more unseemly than if she had been
naked; for she had not modesty.”411 This was also a key theme in other early Christian
writers. Clement of Alexandria observed that when Potiphar’s wife took hold of Joseph’s
coat, “he divested himself of it, becoming bare of sin, but clothed with seemliness of
character.”412 Likewise, Ambrose proposed that Joseph, “left behind the clothing by
which he was held, and fled away, stripped to be sure, but not naked, because he was
covered better by the covering of modesty.”413

The importance of this theme of chastity (swfrosuvnh) in Hellenistic Jewish literature
was discussed earlier.414 A few additional examples from the literature demonstrate the
consistency of the use of this appellation to describe Joseph. In Josephus, Joseph was
warned by Potiphar’s wife that he should acquiesce to her advances or taste her wrath,
“should he reject her suit and set more store on a reputation for chastity (swfrosuvnhV)
than on gratifying his mistress.”415 The woman’s pleading and threats were ultimately to

Matthew*, Vol. 1, Hom 18.2. Curiously, this reference to Joseph falls in a list of characters from the history
of Israel who were “naked and not ashamed.” Chrysostom’s list supports his argument that one should
scrupulously obey Jesus’ commandment that “if any man will sue thee at the law, and take way thy coat, let
him have thy cloke also.”
410 Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Epistles of St. Paul the Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and
Thessalonians*, Hom 10, p. 308.
411 Ibid. This was a favorite target of Chrysostom’s invective against the affluent members of his
congregation. See Kelly, *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom--Ascetic, Preacher, Bishop*, 97-
98, 135-36.
412 Clement, *Stromata* 7.11.
413 Ambrose, *Seven Exegetical Works*, 206.
414 See the discussion above of this virtue in the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*.
no avail, and Josephus depicted her as weeping with the knowledge that, “neither pity could induce him to unchastity (mhw swfronei:n) nor fear compel.”416 Likewise, Philo noted that Joseph rejected the advances of the woman, because “so strong was the sense of decency and temperance (swfrosuvnhn) which nature and the exercise of control had implanted in him.”417 Later, Philo stated that Joseph’s behavior toward the woman would serve him usefully in his political career, because “if the results of licentiousness are civil strife and war, and ill upon ill without number, clearly the results of continence (swfrosuvnhV) are stability and peace and the acquisition and enjoyment of perfect blessings.”418 Patristic writers, such as Chrysostom, freely borrowed this appellation accorded to Joseph as the chaste or moderate patriarch in their own re-narrations of the story.419

Chrysostom used the idea of God’s providential ordering of the events of Joseph’s life as a unifying theme in his homilies. In his Homilies on Acts, Chrysostom addressed the way that “God ordered events,” and specifically the irony in the lives of figures such as Joseph, where “the very things by which we are hurt, by these same are we benefited.”420 In support of this, Chrysostom noted that the plans of Potiphar’s wife seemed to ruin Joseph, but ultimately saved him because, “by her contriving she placed him in a place of safety: for the house where that wild beast (of a woman) was kept was a den in comparison with which the prison was gentle.”421 Thus, God’s Providence oversaw a complete reversal in Joseph’s circumstances, “So that the fact was not that he got into prison, but that he got out of prison.”422 Likewise, though Joseph’s brothers sold him into slavery, “they freed him from having enemies dwelling in the same house with him…they placed him far aloof from them that hated him.”423 This was also true of Pharaoh’s cupbearer, who forgot Joseph’s plea to remember him when he regained

416 Ibid., II.50.
418 Ibid., 11.57.
419 Note also, the argument by James Kugel that the appellation of “Joseph the Righteous” or “Joseph the Virtuous” became common in rabbinic exegesis, and that this title was largely tied to Joseph’s confrontation with Potiphar’s wife. See James L. Kugel, In Potiphar’s House: The Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts, 1st ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), 25.
421 Ibid.
422 Ibid., Hom 49, p. 654.
423 Ibid.
Pharaoh’s favor. Chrysostom argued that this forgetfulness was ordained by God, so that Joseph’s subsequent exaltation “might be more glorious: that the whole might be ascribed, not to man’s favour, but to God’s Providence.”

Again, Chrysostom highlighted the irony in this event, noting “Therefore, it is that the eunuch forgets him, that Egypt might not forget him, that the king might not be ignorant of him.” All of these events acted as constraints to keep Joseph in Egypt, so that he could ultimately save his family: “first by subjection to a master, secondly by being in prison, thirdly by being over the kingdom, to the end that all of this might be brought about by the Providence of God.”

This was also a central theme in Chrysostom’s reflection on Joseph in his *Homilies on Genesis*. At the conclusion of his reflections on Joseph’s sufferings and his final exaltation as ruler of Egypt, Chrysostom noted “So, being in distress and trial is a mark of the loving God’s great care and providence in our regard.”

That this was a key topic in Josephus’ writings has been demonstrated by Harold Attridge, who argued that the theme of God’s Providence formed “a consistent pattern of interpretation of the events of biblical history in the *Antiquities***. Louis Feldman has argued that this was also a theme specific to Josephus’ paraphrase of the life of Joseph. For instance, after refusing the advances of Potiphar’s wife and being thrown into prison, Joseph did not attempt any defense against his unfair imprisonment, but rather “silently underwent his bonds and confinement, confident that God, who knew the cause of his calamity and the truth, would prove stronger than those who had bound him; and of His providence he had proof forthwith.”

In a similar manner, when Joseph finally revealed himself to his brothers he attributed their earlier cruelty to him as a function of God’s

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424 Ibid.
425 Ibid.
426 Ibid., Hom 49, p. 655.
427 Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis* 46-67, 64.33. In this series of homilies Chrysostom often interchanges the theme of God’s Providence with the idea of receiving “grace from on high.” For example in Homily 63.14, Chrysostom concluded “Do you see how wonderful a thing it is to be helped by grace from on high? See how many things divine providence had arranged so that the events affecting Joseph should come to pass.” The ubiquity of this phrase in Chrysostom’s commentary, possibly makes it the key moral theme of Chrysostom’s paraenesis. Additional references to this theme can be found in *Homilies on Genesis* 61.17; 62.23, 24; 63.2,10, 19; 65.12, 18.
430 Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* II.60.
Providence. Josephus recorded Joseph exhortation to his brothers that it was not, “through your own nature that ye did me ill, but by the will of God, working out that happiness that we now enjoy and that shall be ours hereafter, if He continue to be gracious to us.”\textsuperscript{431} One reason for the prominence of this theme in Joseph, was the importance of the idea of providentia in Roman religion. As Robert Wilken has argued, the providential ordering of world events was a key theme in the Roman cult, and the term appears repeatedly on Roman coins.\textsuperscript{432} The active intervention of the gods was foundational to Rome’s survival thus, “Through the providence of the gods the earth came to life each spring, the wheat bloomed, the trees bore fruit, and the heavens opened to provide rain.”\textsuperscript{433} Josephus emphasized this quality in Israel’s God, as a central platform in his cultural apologetic for the values of Hellenistic Judaism.

Chrysostom certainly knew and valued the writings of Josephus, and cited them as direct support in several of his homilies. In his \textit{Homilies on Matthew}, Chrysostom argued that Jesus’ prophetic warning in Matt 24 of coming calamities was addressed specifically to the Jews. As proof that this prophecy was fulfilled in the Jewish war against the Romans, Chrysostom urged his listeners to read the “writings of Josephus, and learn the truth of the sayings.”\textsuperscript{434} Josephus was, according to Chrysostom, a valuable witness, “For neither can any one say, that the man being a believer, in order to establish Christ’s words, hath exaggerated the tragical history.”\textsuperscript{435} Chrysostom also cited Josephus as a source in his \textit{Discourses against Judaizing Christians}. As confirmation of his interpretation of certain prophecies from the book of Daniel, Chrysostom offered the work of Josephus, in order that his listeners, “may know that my words are not based on mere conjecture.”\textsuperscript{436} Josephus was, according to Chrysostom, “a witness whom the Jews regard with the highest trust…who has made their disasters a subject of tragic history and who has paraphrased the entire Old Testament.”\textsuperscript{437} In light of this, Chrysostom’s use of

\textsuperscript{431} Ibid., II.161.
\textsuperscript{432} Wilken, \textit{The Christians as the Romans Saw Them}, 59.
\textsuperscript{433} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{435} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{436} Chrysostom, \textit{Discourses against Judaizing Christians}, 5.5.
\textsuperscript{437} Ibid. For other references to Josephus in Chrysostom’s homilies see \textit{Homilies on John}, Hom 65; \textit{Homilies on Acts}, Hom 5; and \textit{Homilies on I Thessalonians}, Hom 8.
this theme of God’s Providence points toward a direct reading of and borrowing from Josephus’ own paraphrase of the life of Joseph.

Chrysostom, similarly to the other early Christian literature surveyed by this paper, manifested a consistent concern for elucidating the connections between the history of Israel and his own community. Chrysostom attempted to do this through some use of typology, but mainly through moral exposition which drew upon figures, such as Joseph, because of the rhetorical power of their great antiquity. Christianity and its virtues were not something new and thus illegitimate. Chrysostom could trace its origins to the venerated history of Judaism, forming what Rowan Greer labeled a “sacred history presided over by God’s providence.”

Chrysostom’s source and model for many of the key themes in his moral exegesis of Joseph can be traced directly to the literature of Hellenistic Judaism. Drawing upon this literature, Chrysostom proposed that this ancient figure from Israel’s past was an apt exemplar for timeless virtues. As Chrysostom argued, concerning Joseph, toward the end of his *Homilies on Genesis*: “Who could adequately admire the virtue of this good man who fulfilled in generous measure the moral values of the New Testament?”

**Conclusion:**

**Joseph in Eusebius and the Construction of Christian History**

The early Christian sources surveyed in this paper all demonstrated a concern for articulating connections between the history of Israel and the church. This was, in part, a response to the charges by pagan apologists such as Celsus and Julian that Christianity was a “new” sect lacking the venerated antiquity of other religious traditions. As such, this emphasis on connections with the history of Israel was foundational to the construction of identity within early Christianity. Raoul Mortley has argued for the importance of this theme of connections, noting “Historical research is the first step in self-identification.”

Writers such as Origen, in his apologetic work *Contra Celsum*,

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438 Kugel and Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation*, 123.
439 Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis* 46-67, 64.32.
argued for the “deeper wisdom” of the Jews over against the traditions of other nations. Eusebius (c. 260-340 C.E.), the bishop of Caesarea and famous historian of the church, began his *Ecclesiastical History* with an introduction to the history of Israel, emphasizing the connection between this history and that of the church. Indeed, by beginning with the history of Israel Eusebius argued, “In this way...will both the genuine antiquity and the divine majesty of the Christian religion be shown to those who assume that it is recent and foreign, having put in an appearance no earlier than yesterday.”

Eusebius also argued for the great wisdom found in the history of Israel, and contended that even the revered philosophy of the Greeks had largely been borrowed from the Hebrews. As a result, Eusebius acknowledged in his *Preparation for the Gospel* that Christianity “preferred” the philosophy and religion of the Hebrews. He demonstrated the reasonableness of this choice, by building a case for the important virtues of the Hebrews and their great antiquity. In view of this, Eusebius concluded:

“Do you not think then that we have with reason preferred these to the Greeks, and accepted the histories of godly men among the Hebrews rather than the gods of Phoenicia and Egypt, and the blasphemous absurdities of those gods?” Indeed, Eusebius acknowledged Christianity’s debt to the history of Israel, contending “that nothing at all has yet been found among any of the nations like the boon which has been provided for us among the Hebrews.”

This focus on the connections between the church and the history of Israel was, however, not without its risks for early Christian writers. Though figures such as Joseph figured prominently in the sacred history of Christianity, there were distinct differences in how the church and Israel remained connected to that history. And, pagan apologists were attuned to these differences, exploiting them in their criticisms of Christianity. Celsus in his attack on Christianity, questioned Christians on this point by asking them, through the voice of an imaginary Jew, “why do you take your origin from our religion, and then, as if you are progressing in knowledge, despise these things, although you

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441 Origen, *Contra Celsum*, V.43.
444 Ibid., 8.1, 298d.
445 Ibid., 7.4, 303c.
446 Ibid., 7.1, 298d.
cannot name any other origin for your doctrine than our law?” Julian also maligned
the Christians for preferring “the belief of the Jews to ours;” but noted that “they do not
even adhere to the Jewish beliefs but have abandoned them also and followed a way of
their own.” The pagan apologists saw duplicity in the Christian claim of antiquity by
relation to the history of Israel, when in fact they rejected certain elements of that history
such as circumcision and the observance of the Mosaic laws. Eusebius acknowledged
this problem, noting that critics of Christianity charged them with impiety in this
selective approach to Israel’s history. The pagan apologists argued that Christians “put
aside the customs of their own kindred….not even to adhere to the God who is honored
among the Jews according to their customary rites.” The Christians have instead, “cut
out for themselves a new kind of track in a pathless desert.”

These criticisms highlighted the fundamental tension that lay at the heart of the
Christian reading of history. Early Christian writers were forced to face these criticisms
by navigating between the contrasting identities of early Christianity as being both new
(as the new Israel) and old (as the true inheritors of the history and traditions of Israel).
As Eusebius argued, the Christian revelation was “very, very old; and on the other hand,
it is new through having been as it were hidden away from men through a long period
between, and now come to life again by the Saviour’s teaching.”

Eusebius dealt with this issue in a radical way by creating a distinction between
caracters in the Old Testament Scriptures who were Hebrews and those who were Jews.
Eusebius noted:

the latter assumed their name from Judah, from whose tribe the kingdom of Judah
was long ages afterwards established, but the former from Eber, who was
forefather of Abraham. And that the Hebrews were earlier than the Jews, we are
taught by the sacred writings.

The Jews were the people of the Mosaic Law, which had been given to them because,
“they were unable through moral weakness to emulate the virtue of their fathers,

447 Origen, _Contra Celsum_ II.4.
448 Julian, _Against the Galileans_, 43 A.
449 Eusebius, _Preparation for the Gospel_, 1.2, 5c.
450 Ibid.
452 Eusebius _The Preparation for the Gospel_ 7.6, 304b.
inasmuch as they were enslaved by passions and sick in soul." 453 The Hebrews, on the other hand, having never heard of all the Mosaic legislation, enjoyed a free and unfettered mode of religion, being regulated by the manner of life which is in accordance with nature, so that they had no need of laws to rule them, because of the extreme freedom of their soul from passions, but had received true knowledge of the doctrines concerning God. 454

Thus, for Eusebius Joseph was a “Hebrew of the Hebrews, and not a Jew (because the Jewish nation did not yet exist).” 455 Indeed, if one could be transported back to the land of ancient Egypt, “you would find Joseph in pre-Mosaic times in the palaces of the Egyptians living in freedom not burdened by Judaism." 456

Eusebius argued that distinguishing Joseph and the other pre-Mosaic figures as Hebrews and not Jews was important because:

From all of this it is abundantly proved that the Word of God announced to all nations the ancient form of their ancestors’ religion, as the new covenant does not differ from the form of holiness, which was very ancient even in the time of Moses, so that it is at the same time both old and new. 457

This approach to navigating the tension between old and new was employed in a less radical way by the writer of Hebrews 11, who emphasized the connection of the Christian community through lines of faith to the pre-Mosaic patriarchs. And, the importance of these pre-Mosaic patriarchs was emphasized by both Aphrahat and Chrysostom.

Eusebius also acknowledged the use of “symbols and shadows,” which pointed toward their fulfillment in Christ as another means of mediating the tension of the old and the new. 458 Thus people and events in the history of Israel, when viewed through the light of fuller revelation mirrored events in the life of Jesus. Connections were thus drawn between the ancient history of Israel and the more recent history of the church, thus emphasizing their continuity. As this thesis has demonstrated this method was alluded to in Stephen’s speech in Acts 7, but was more fully employed in the Epistle of Barnabas,

453 Ibid., 7,8, 312d.
454 Ibid., 7,6, 304d. Note here the emphasis on universal ethics perceived in accord with nature- again, a key theme in the apologetic of Hellenistic Judaism.
455 Ibid., 7,8, 312b.
457 Ibid., I,6, 16d.
458 Eusebius, Preparation for the Gospel, 7,8, 312d.
early apologists such as Justin Martyr and Tertullian, Aphrahat, and to a limited extent in Ephrem and Chrysostom. The allegorical method of Origen was shown to have a similar concern for emphasizing the on-going importance of the events of Israel’s history to the Christian community.

Eusebius also identified Joseph as a moral example, who should be emulated by the Christian community. As demonstrated in this study this was a key theme in early Christian writing on Joseph. He was interpreted as a moral exemplar in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, Clement, Aphrahat, Ephrem, and especially in the writings of John Chrysostom. Eusebius retold the story of Joseph, focusing, as other Christian and Hellenistic Jewish writers, on the confrontation of Joseph with Potiphar’s wife. She was a “terrible and raging beast,” who tried to entrap Joseph into “licentious and amorous intercourse.” Joseph, however, “recalling the memory of the piety of his forefathers…shakes off the base and licentious woman, putting her aside with a stronger hand.” Because of Joseph’s piety and virtuous resistance to the woman he was “received among the thrice blessed and most highly favoured friends of God.” This form of holiness demonstrated in figures such as Joseph, “which was ancient even in the time of Moses” was also new because it had “now come to life again by the Saviour’s teaching.”

Arnaldo Momigliano argued that Eusebius was creating a new kind of history by deemphasizing the political narrative in his writings. Christian historical writing as a whole focused on biographies of saints, rather than key political figures. The result of this emphasis was that “all other types of men became inferior to that of the saint. Early Christian writers were thus crafting a new form of history- a holy history written through the lives of pious men forming moral exemplars for the reader. This emphasis extended to the figures from the history of Israel, who were claimed by early Christian

459 Ibid., 7.8, 311b.
460 Ibid., 7.8, 311d.
461 Ibid.
462 Ibid., 7.8, 312b.
463 Eusebius, The Proof of the Gospel, 1.6, 16d.
465 Ibid., 93.
466 Ibid.
writers as actors “not of a profane history” but rather of a “sacred history which belonged to them since it extends into the church.”467 These figures mediated the foundational tension between old and new, becoming “the Christian saints of the Old Testament, constituting an uninterrupted chain of testimony to the truth.”468 Indeed, it was because of this sacred history that Chrysostom could praise Joseph as an ancient figure from the history of Israel who, paradoxically, “fulfilled in generous measure the moral values of the New Testament?”469

In so doing, the Christian construction of history borrowed from the “pioneering work of Hellenistic Judaism.”470 They had been preceded in this construction of an apologetic history by the writers of Hellenistic Judaism, who successfully defended the great virtues and antiquity of their traditions through allegorical and moral exegesis. This thesis has demonstrated that early Christian writers borrowed these methods, preserving in the process many of the writings and traditions of Hellenistic Judaism. As a result, scholars such as John Collins have argued, “The legacy of the Hellenistic Diaspora was inherited not by Judaism but by the emerging Christian church.”471 The process, however, was much more complex than this. Christian writers only borrowed the methods of Hellenistic Judaism in so much as they served to emphasize the connections between the history of Israel and their own communities. Use of writers, such as Philo and Josephus, and their interpretations of Joseph served to further what Mortley termed “historical research,” and as such became “the first step in self-identification.”472 Early Christian writers were constructing their own version of history- a sacred history, and these methods of the interpretation of texts and figures such as Joseph became “the principal site of tension between past and future, the preservation and refashioning of religious identity.”473 Thus figures such as Joseph were claimed by early Christianity to be “much more ours than yours,” because the possessive pronoun “ours” was indefinable without these figures and texts from the history of Israel.

467 Pierre Maraval, Figures de l’Ancien Testament chez les Pères, I.
468 Ibid.
469 Chrysostom, Homilies on Genesis 46-67, 64.32.
470 Rokeah, Jews, Pagans, and Christians in Conflict, 90. The writers examined in this paper from the Syriac sources (Aphrahat and Ephrem) also borrowed from the developing genre of Midrashic literature.
471 Collins, Between Athens and Jerusalem : Jewish Identity in the Hellenistic Diaspora, 275.
473 Dawson, Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity, 207.
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